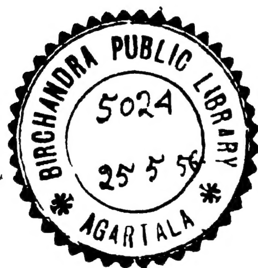
THE COLLECTED STORIES OF RHYS DAVIES







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Preface

WHEN a suitable period has elapsed a writer is entitled to exercise judgment of his past work, and from the eighty-odd of my published short stories I have chosen these forty-three which yield me various degrees of satisfaction: the rest cause me various degrees of unease.

I have not imposed a deliberate pattern or rigid grouping of stories in this collection, placing them according to date of composition (the development—if any?—of this writer), or subject-matter background, length, etc. Unless a collection possesses a linking theme, I think the stories can be thrown together fairly loosely, allowing the reader to pick his own way among them. In my experience it is a mistake to read a collection consecutively or more than two or three stories at a time; the constant switching of different themes and sets of characters cancels out the effect of each. A volume of stories has the advantage of making small demands on one's time and should be dipped into with that sense of idleness with which one takes up an anthology of lyrics or ballads—the short story's closest affinities. But if anyone does read a large collection consecutively I hope that a too unendurable sense of monotony has been avoided for him here; that is the only grouping I have kept in mind. A comic story is followed by a tragic, or a tale essentially Welsh in its flavour by a dose of swart London behaviour. A few of the stories scattered through this assembly were written twenty-five years ago and—if I may be allowed to venture this—give me an egoistic satisfaction despite their youthful crudity; for me they contain the antics of a beginner showing off as he takes an instinctive plunge into this reputedly difficult medium. (That instinct to *dive*, swift and agile, into the opening of a story holds, for me, half the technical art; one must not on any account loiter or brood in the first paragraph; be deep in the story's elements in a few seconds.)

Short stories are a luxury which only those writers who fall in love with them can afford to cultivate. To such a writer they yield the purest enjoyment; they become a privately elegant craft allowing, within very strict confines, a wealth of idiosyncrasies. Compared with the novel, that great public park so often complete with draughty spaces, noisy brass band and unsightly litter, the enclosed and quiet short story garden is of small importance, and never has been much more. (Tchekoff compared with Dostoevsky; Maupassant with Balzac.) The short story gives the release of a day off, when something happened which one remembers with a smile or a start of interest, with a pang or a pause of fear. These are moods when Joyce's masterly tale *The Dead* makes *Ulysses* seem an obstreperous curiosity which one doesn't return to after the age of thirty; not many winters have passed when I have not read *The Dead* with undiminished admiration.

Another virtue of the short story is that it can be allowed to laugh. A humorous novel can get on one's nerves, in the same way that a face that keeps its smile for hours on end depresses or exasperates one into irritation. It surprises me that more short story writers—I read a great many—do not take advantage of the laugh that is so eminently acceptable in this medium. In recent years I have noticed that laughter is out of favour, though its brunette confederate, satire, is not yet in the same disgrace. Yet a book of short stories, by its nature, is an attractive opportunity to look into many houses in one's street and note that not all the families are dismal or living under some blight, although threats and tribulations have increased in the world. But I must own here that the word 'humour' has a rather lowering effect. It ought not to have been mentioned. The essence of humour is mysteriously evasive. It doesn't always travel well. It can be poisonous fungus to some solemn constitutions. Humour should steal on a reader unsuspected. It must also, like rascals, be kept in control. Myself, I favour a dark, funereal tale, though not always.

RHYS DAVIES

The Dilemma of Catherine Fuchsias

PUFFED UP BY HIS SUCCESS AS A SHIP-CHANDLER in the port forty miles away, where he had gone from the village of Banog when the new town was rising to its heyday as the commercial capital of Wales, Lewis had retired to the old place heavy with gold and fat. With him was the bitter English wife he had married for her money, and he built the pink-washed villa overlooking Banog's pretty trout stream. And later he had set up a secret association with an unmarried woman of forty who was usually called Catherine Fuchsias, this affair—she receiving him most Sunday evenings after chapel in her outlying cottage—eluding public notice for two years. Until on one of those evenings, Lewis, who for some weeks had been complaining of a "feeling of fullness", expired in her arms on the bed.

In every village there is a Jezebel or the makings of one, though sometimes these descend virtuous to their graves because of lack of opportunity or courage, fear of gossip or ostracism. Lewis the Chandler was Catherine Fuchsias' first real lover, so that for her to lose him like that not only dreadfully shocked her but, it will be agreed, placed her in a serious dilemma. She was not a born bad lot and, as a girl, she had been left in the lurch by a sweetheart who had gone prospecting to Australia and never fulfilled his promise to call her there. Thereafter she had kept house for her father, a farm worker, until he had followed her mother into the burial-ground surrounding Horeb chapel, which she cleaned for five shillings a week; in addition she had a job three days a week in the little wool factory a mile beyond Banog. It was in Horeb chapel during service that Lewis first studied her and admired her egg-brown face, thick haunches and air of abundant health. Her cottage stood concealed on a bushy slope outside the village, and she had a great liking for fuchsias, which grew wonderfully in the rich lap of the cottage.

When her paramour died on her bed she at first refused to believe it, so pertinacious and active was he and so unlike her

idea of a man of sixty-four. Nevertheless, she ran howling downstairs. There she madly poked the fire, flung the night cloth over the canary's cage, ran into the kitchen and swilled a plate or two in a bowl, straightened a mat, and tidied her hair. In the mirror *there* was her face, Miss Catherine Bowen's face, looking no different, a solid unharmed fact with its brown speckles. The autumn dusk beginning to arrive at the window was quiet and natural as the chirp of the bird winging past the pane. For a moment she listened to the grandfather clock ticking away the silence. Then, with a bustling haste, she filled the kettle, lit the oil cooker, took an apple tart out of a zinc safe, looked at it, and put it back. She stood still again. And groaned.

She crept half-way up the stairs and called: "Mr. Lewis . . . Mr. Lewis, here I am! Just put the kettle on. Time's going, boy. Come down straight away . . . Mr. Lewis!" She raised her voice. "Lewis, stir yourself, boy. Come on now!" Only the clock replied. She sat on the stairs and groaned. "Lewis," she whimpered, "there's a trick you are playing on me! Don't you come here again, I am offended . . . Yes, offended I am. I'll go for a walk, that's what I'll do. And don't you be here when I'm back." She tramped noisily down the stairs, unlocked the front door, and slammed it behind her.

Bats were flying round the cottage. The sunflowers were hanging their half-asleep heads, and the old deep well among the luxuriant chrysanthemum bushes at the bottom of the garden, on which her eye rested for a dazed but speculative minute, stood in secret blue shadow. But she hurried out of the garden by the side gate where a path led into a coppice of dwarf trees and bushes. "I'll go and pick mushrooms in Banner's fields, that's what I'll do," she assured herself. "Gone he'll be by the time I'm back." But she did not descend the slope to the farm's fields. She scrambled into a ring of bushes and hid herself there on a patch of damp grass. One eye remained open in palpitating awareness, the other was half closed, as if she was in profound thought.

A bad shock can work wonders with a person's sensibility. Buried talents can be whisked up into activity, a primitive cunning reign again in its shady empire of old instincts. Or such a shock can create—women especially being given to escape into this—a fantasy of bellicose truth, a performance of the imagination that has nothing to do with hypocrisy but is the terrified soul

backing away from reality. Catherine sprang up and hurried back to her whitewashed cottage. Already in the long dusky vale and the distant village a few lights shone out. She shot into the cottage and ran upstairs.

"Well, Mr. Lewis," she exclaimed loudly, "better you are after your rest?" She went close to the bed and peered down at the stout dusky figure lying on the patchwork quilt. "Well now, I am not liking the look of you at all," she addressed it, half scoldingly. "What have you taken your jacket off for? Hot you were? Dear me, quite bad you look. Best for me to fetch your wife and the doctor. But you mustn't lie there with your coat off or a cold you will catch." Volubly tut-tutting, she lit a candle and set about the task. Already, in the hour that had elapsed, he had begun to stiffen somewhat. She perspired and groaned, alternately blenching and going red. He was heavily cumbersome as a big sack of turnips: she was obliged to prop up his back with a small chair wedged against the bedstead. Luckily he had removed only his jacket, but (since of late he had got stouter) this, which was of chapel-black vicuña, fitted tight as the skin of a bladder of lard. Downstairs, the grandfather clock ticked loud and hurried.

Finally, buttoned up complete, he rested tidy, and she staggered back sweating. To lay out her father she had got the assistance of the blacksmith's wife.

For a minute she stood in contemplation of her work, then ran downstairs to fetch up his hat, umbrella, and hymn-book. She dropped the umbrella beside the bed, placed the hat on the bedside table, and laid the hymn-book on the quilt as though it had fallen from his hand. And all the time she uttered clamorous remarks of distress at his condition—"Oh, Mr. Lewis, you didn't ought to have taken a walk, unwell like you are. Climbing! Lucky I saw you leaning over my gate. Dropped dead in the road you might have, and stayed there all night and got bitten by the stoats! You rest quiet now, and I won't be long." At another thought she placed a glass of water by the bedside. Then, giving her own person a quick look-over, she put on a raincoat and a flowered hat, blew out the candle, and hastened from the cottage. It was past nine o'clock and quite dark, and she never rode her bicycle in the dark.

Half an hour later she banged at the costly oaken door of the pink villa, calling excitedly: "Mrs. Lewis, Mrs. Lewis, come to

your husband!" Milly Jones, the servant, opened the door, and Catherine violently pushed her inside. "Where's Mrs. Lewis? Let me see her quick." But Mrs. Lewis was already standing, stiff as a poker, in the hall.

"Catherine Fuchsias it is!" exclaimed Milly Jones, who was a native of Banog. "Why, what's the matter with you?"

Catherine seemed to totter. "Come to your husband, Mrs. Lewis, crying out for you he is! Oh dear," she groaned, "run all the way I have, fast as a hare." She gulped, sat on a chair, and panted: "Put your hat on quick, Mrs. Lewis, and tell Milly Jones to go to Dr. Watkins."

Mrs. Lewis, who had the English reserve, never attended chapel, and also unlikably minded her own business, stared hard. "My husband has met with an accident?" she asked, precise and cold.

"Wandering outside my gate I found him just now!" cried Catherine. "Fetching water from my well I was, and saw him swaying about and staring at me white as cheese. 'Oh, Mr. Lewis,' I said, 'what is the matter with you, ill you are? Not your way home from chapel is this!' . . . 'Let me rest in your cottage for a minute,' he said to me, 'and give me a glass of water, my heart is jumping like a toad.' . . . So I helped him in and he began to grunt awful, and I said: 'Best to go and lie down on my poor father's bed, Mr. Lewis, and I will run at once and tell Mrs. Lewis to fetch Dr. Watkins.' . . . Bring the doctor to him quick, Mrs. Lewis! Frightened me he has and no one to leave with him, me watering my chrysanthemums and just going to lock up for the night and seeing a man hanging sick over my gate——" She panted and dabbed her face.

Milly Jones was already holding a coat for her mistress, who frowned impatiently as Catherine went on babbling of the fright she had sustained. Never a talkative person, the Englishwoman only said, abrupt: "Take me to your house. . . . Milly, go for the doctor and tell him what you've just heard." And she did not say very much as she stalked along beside Catherine, who still poured out a repeating wealth of words.

Arrived at the dark cottage, Catherine bawled comfortingly on the stairs: "Come now, Mr. Lewis, here we are. Not long I've been, have I?"

"You ought to have left a light for him," remarked Mrs. Lewis on the landing.

"What if he had tumbled and set the bed on fire!" said Catherine indignantly. In the heavily silent room she struck a match and lit the candle. "Oh!" she shrieked.

Mrs. Lewis stood staring through her glasses. And then, in a strangely fallen voice, said: "John! . . . John!" Catherine covered her face with her hands, crying in dramatic woe. "Hush, *woman* . . . hush," said Mrs. Lewis sternly.

Catherine moved her hands from her face and glared. *Woman*, indeed! In her own house! When she had been so kind! But all she said was: "Well, Mrs. Lewis, enough it is to upset anyone with a soft heart when a stranger dies in her house. . . . *Why*," she began insidiously, "was he wandering in the lanes all by himself in his bad state? Poor man, why is it he didn't go home after chapel? Wandering lost outside my gate like a lonely orphan child!"

Mrs. Lewis, as though she were examining someone applying for a place in her villa kitchen, gave her a long, glimmering look. "Here is the doctor " she said.

"Yes indeed," Catherine exclaimed, "and I am hoping he can take Mr. Lewis away with him in his motor." The glance she directed at the corpse was now charged with hostility. "He is a visitor that has taken advantage of my poor little cottage." And was there a hint of malice in her manner as she swung her hips past Mrs. Lewis, went to the landing, and called down the stairs: "Come up, Dr. Watkins. But behind time you are."

Having verified the death and listened to Catherine's profuse particulars of how she had found him at the gate and strained herself helping him up the stairs, Dr. Watkins, who was of local birth and a cheerful man, said: "Well, well, only this evening it was I saw him singing full strength in chapel, his chest out like a robin's. Pity he never would be a patient of mine. 'You mind that heart of yours, John Lewis,' I told him once, free of charge, 'and don't you smoke, drink, or sing.' Angina he had, sure as a tree got knots."

"He liked to sing at the top of his voice," agreed Mrs. Lewis. She took up the hymn-book from the quilt, turned quickly to Catherine, and demanded: "Did he take this with him to the bed, ill as he was?"

"No!" Catherine's voice rang. With Dr. Watkins present, the

familiar local boy, she looked even more powerful. "After I had helped him there and he laid a minute and went a better colour, I said: 'Now, Mr. Lewis, you read a hymn or two while I run off; strength they will give you'."

"But you put the candle out!" pounced Mrs. Lewis. "It must have been getting quite dark by then."

"There," Catherine pointed a dramatic finger, "is the box of matches, with the glass of water I gave him." She stood aggressive, while Dr. Watkins's ears moved. "Candles can be lit."

"This," proceeded Mrs. Lewis, her eyes gazing around and resting in turn on a petticoat hanging on a peg and the women's articles on the dressing table, "*this* was your father's room?"

"Yes," Catherine said, defiant; "where he died and laid till they took him to Horeb. But when the warm weather comes, in here I move from the back; cooler it is and the view in summer same as on the postcards that the visitors buy, except for the old Trout Bridge. . . . What are you so inquisitive about?" She began to bridle. "Tidy it is here, and no dust. You would like to look under the bed? In the chest?"

Mrs. Lewis, cold of face, turned to the doctor. "Could you say how long my husband has been dead?"

He made show of moving the corpse's eyelids, pinching a cheek, swinging an arm. "A good two hours or more," he said with downright assurance.

"Then," said Mrs. Lewis, "he must have been dead when he walked up those stairs! It takes only half an hour to reach my house from here." She turned stern to Catherine: "You said you came running to me as soon as you helped him up here to your father's room."

"A law of the land there is!" Catherine's voice rang. "Slander and malice is this, and jealous spite!" She took on renewed power and, like an actress towering and swelling into rage, looked twice her size. "See," she cried to Dr. Watkins, "how it is that kind acts are rewarded, and nipped by a serpent is the hand of charity stretched out to lay the dying stranger on a bed! Better if I had let him fall dead outside my gate like a workhouse tramp and turned my back on him to water my Michaelmas daisies. Forty years I have lived in Banog, girl and woman, and not a stain small as a farthing on my character." With her two hands she pushed up her inflated breasts as though they hurt her. "Take

out of my house," she sang in crescendo, "my poor dead visitor that can't rise up and tell the holy truth for me. No husband, father, or brother have I to fight for my name. Take him!"

"Not possible tonight," said Dr. Watkins, bewildered but appreciative of Catherine's tirade. "Late and a Sunday it is, and the undertaker many miles away."

"The lady by there," said Catherine, pointing a quivering finger, "can hire the farm cart of Peter the Watercress, if he can't go in your motor."

"I," said Mrs. Lewis, "have no intention of allowing my husband to remain in this house tonight." The tone in which she pronounced "this house" demolished the abode to an evil shambles.

"Oh, oh," wailed Catherine, beginning again, and moving to the bedside. "John Lewis!" she called to the corpse, "John Lewis, rise up and tell the truth! Swim back across Jordan for a short minute and make dumb the bitter tongue that you married! Miss Catherine R[illegible], that took you innocent into her little clean cottage, is calling to you, and——"

Dr. Watkins, who had twice taken up his bag and laid it down again, interfered decisively at last, for he had been called out by Milly Jones just as he was sitting down to some slices of cold duck. "Hush now," he said to both women, a man and stern, "hush now. Show respect for the passed away. . . . A cart and horse you would like hired?" he asked Mrs. Lewis. "I will drive you to Llewellyn's farm and ask them to oblige you."

"And oblige me too!" Catherine had the last word, swinging her hips out of the room.

The corpse, though not much liked owing to its bragging when alive, was of local origin, and Llewellyn the Farmer agreed readily enough to disturb his stallion, light candles in the cart lanterns, and collect two village men to help carry the heavy man down Catherine Fuchsias' stairs. Already the village itself had been willingly disturbed out of its Sabbath night quiet, for Milly Jones, after calling at the doctor's, was not going to deprive her own people of the high news that rich Mr. Lewis had mysteriously been taken ill in Catherine's cottage. So when the farm cart stopped to collect the two men, news of the death was half expected. Everybody was left agog and expectant of the new week being a full one. What had Mr. Lewis been doing wandering

round Catherine's cottage up there after chapel? Strange it was. Married men didn't go for walks and airings after chapel.

On Monday morning, before the dew was off her flowers, Catherine's acquaintance, Mrs. Morgans, who lived next door to the Post Office, bustled into the cottage. "Catherine, dear," she exclaimed, peering at her hard. "What is this, a man dying on your bed!"

"My father's bed," corrected Catherine. And at once her body began to swell. "Oh, Jinny Morgans, my place in Heaven I have earned. I have strained myself," she moaned, placing her hands round her lower middle, "helping him up my stairs after I found him whining like an old dog outside my gate. A crick I have got in my side too. So stout he was, and crying to lay down on a bed. I thought he had eaten a toadstool for a mushroom in the dark."

"What was he doing, walking about up here whatever?" Mrs. Morgans breathed.

"Once before I saw him going by when I was in my garden. He stopped to make compliments about my fuchsias—— Oh," she groaned, clasping her stomach, "the strain is cutting me shocking."

"Your fuchsias——" egged on Mrs. Morgans.

"Very big they hung this year. And he said to me, 'When I was a boy I used to come round here to look for tadpoles in the ponds.' Ah!" she groaned again.

"Tadpoles." Mrs. Morgans nodded, still staring fixed and full on her friend, and sitting tense with every pore open. As is well known, women hearken to words but rely more on the secret information obtained by the sense that has no language.

Catherine, recognising that an ambassador had arrived, made a sudden dive into the middle of the matter, her hands flying away from her stomach and waving threatening. And again she went twice her size and beat her breast. "That jealous Mrs. Lewis," she shouted, "came here and went smelling round the room nasty as a cat. This and that she hinted, with Dr. Watkins there for witness! A law of slander there is," she shot a baleful glance at her visitor, "and let one more word be said against my character and I will go off straight to Vaughan Solicitor and get a letter of warning sent."

"Ha!" said Mrs. Morgans, suddenly relaxing her great intent-

ness. "Ha!" Her tone, like her nod, was obscure of meaning, and on the whole she seemed to be reserving judgment.

Indeed, what real proof was there of unhealthy proceedings having been transacted in Catherine's cottage? Mrs. Morgans went back to the village with her report and that day everybody sat on it in cautious meditation. In Catherine's advantage was the general dislike of proud Mrs. Lewis, but, on the other hand, a Jezebel, for the common good and the protection of men, must not be allowed to flourish unpunished. All day in the Post Office, in the Glyndwr Arms that evening, and in every cottage and farmhouse, the matter was observed from several loquacious angles.

On Wednesday afternoon Mr. Maldwyn Davies, B.A., the minister of Horeb, climbed to the cottage, and was received by his member and chapel cleaner with a vigorous flurry of welcome. Needlessly dusting a chair, scurrying for a cushion, shouting to the canary, that at the minister's entrance began to chirp and swing his perch madly, to be quiet, Catherine fussily settled him before running to put the kettle on. In the kitchen she remembered her condition and returned slow and clasping herself. "Ah," she moaned, "my pain has come back! Suffering chronic I've been, off and on, since Sunday night. So heavy was poor Mr. Lewis to take up my stairs. But what was I to be doing with a member of Horeb whining outside my gate for a bed? Shut my door on him as if he was a scamp or a member of the Church of England?"

"Strange," said Mr. Davies, his concertina neck, that could give forth such sweet music in the pulpit, closing down into his collar, "strange that he climbed up here so far, feeling unwell." He stared at the canary as if the bird held the explanation.

"Delirious and lighted up he was!" she cried. "And no wonder. Did he want to go to his cold home after the sermon and singing in chapel? No! Two times and more I have seen him wandering round here looking full up with thoughts. One time he stopped at my gate and had praises for my dahlias, for I was watering them. 'Oh, Mr. Lewis,' I said to him, 'what are you doing walking up here?' and he said, 'I am thinking over the grand sermon Mr. Davies gave us just now, and I would climb big mountains if mountains there were!' Angry with myself I am now that I didn't ask him in for a cup of tea, so lonely he was looking. 'Miss

Bowen,' he said to me, 'when I was a boy I used to come rabbiting up here'."

"Your dahlias," remarked Mr. Davies, still meditatively gazing at the canary, "are prize ones, and the rabbits a pest."

"Oh," groaned Catherine, placing her hands round her lower middle, "grumbling I am not, but there's a payment I am having for my kindness last Sunday! . . . Hush," she bawled threateningly to the canary, "hush, or no more seed today."

Mr. Davies, oddly, seemed unable to say much. Perhaps he, too, was trying to sniff the truth out of the air. But he looked serious. The reputation of two of his flock was in jeopardy, two who had been nourished by his sermons, and it was unfortunate that one of them lay beyond examination.

"Your kettle is boiling over," he reminded her, since in her exalted state she seemed unable to hear such things.

She darted with a shriek into the kitchen, and when she came back with a loaded tray, which she had no difficulty in carrying, she asked: "When are you burying him?"

"Thursday, two o'clock. It is a public funeral. . . . You will go to it?" he asked delicately.

This time she replied, sharp and rebuking: "What, indeed, *me?* Me that's got to stay at home because of my strain and can only eat custards? Flat on my back in bed I ought to be this minute. . . . Besides," she said, beginning to bridle again, "Mrs. Lewis, the *lady*, is a nasty!" She paused to take a long breath and to hand him a buttered muffin.

"Her people are not our people," he conceded, and pursed his lips.

Fluffing herself up important, and not eating anything herself, Catherine declared: "Soon as I am well I am off to Vaughan Solicitor, to have advice." Black passion began to scald her voice; she pointed a trembling finger ceilingwards. "Up there she stood in the room of my respected father, with Dr. Watkins for witness, and her own poor husband not gone cold and his eyes on us shiny as buttons, and her spiteful tongue made remarks. Hints and sarcastic! Nearly dropped dead I did myself. . . . The hand stretched out in charity was bitten by a viper!" She began to swell still more. "Forty years I have lived in Banog, clean as a whistle, and left an orphan to do battle alone. Swear I would before the King of England and all the judges of the world that

Mr. John Lewis was unwell when he went on the bed up there! Swear I would that my inside was strained by his weight. A heathen gypsy would have taken him into her caravan! Comfort I gave him in his last hour. The glass of water by the bed, and a stitch in my side racing to fetch his wife, that came here stringy and black-natured as a bunch of dry old seaweed and made evil remarks for thanks. . . . Oh!" she clasped her breasts as if they would explode, "if justice there is, all the true tongues of Banog must rise against her and drive the bad-speaking stranger away from us over the old bridge. Our honest village is to be made nasty as a sty, is it? No!"

Not for nothing had she sat all these years in close attention to Mr. Davies's famous sermons, which drew persons from remote farms even in winter. And, as she rocked on her thick haunches and her voice passed from the throbbing of harps to the roll of drums, Mr. Davies sat at last in admiration, the rare admiration that one artist gives to another. She spoke with such passion that, when she stopped, her below-the-waist pains came back and, rubbing her hands on the affected parts, she moaned in anguish, rolling up her big moist eyes.

"There now," he said, a compassionate and relenting note in his voice, "there now, take comfort." And as he pronounced: "There must be no scandal in Banog!" she knew her battle was won.

"Put your hands by here," she cried, "and you will feel the aches and cricks jumping from my strain."

But Mr. Davies, a fastidious look hesitating for a moment across his face, accepted her word. He took a slice of apple tart and ate it, nodding in meditation. A woman fighting to preserve the virtue of what, it is said, is the most priceless treasure of her sex is a woman to be admired and respected. Especially if she is a Banog one. And it was natural that he was unwilling to accept that two of his members could have forgotten themselves so scandalously. Nevertheless, as Catherine coiled herself down from her exalted though aching state and at last sipped a little strong tea, he coughed and remarked: "It is said that nearly every Sunday night for two years or more Mr. Lewis never arrived home from chapel till ten o'clock, and no trace is there of his occupation in these hours. 'A walk,' he used to tell in his home, 'a Sunday-night walk I take to think over the sermon.' That is what the servant Milly Jones has told in Banog, and also that in strong

doubt was Mrs. Lewis concerning those walks in winter and summer."

"Then a policeman she ought to have set spying behind him," said Catherine, blowing on a fresh cup of tea with wonderful assurance. "Oh, a shame it is that the dead man can't rise up and speak. Oh, wicked it is that a dead man not buried yet is turned into a goat." Calm now, and the more impressive for it, she added: "Proofs they must bring out, strict proofs. Let Milly Jones go babbling more, and *two* letters from Vaughan Solicitor I will have sent."

"Come now," said Mr. Davies hastily, "come now, the name of Banog must not be bandied about outside and talked of in the market. Come now, the matter must be put away. Wind blows and wind goes." He rose, gave a kind nod to the canary, and left her.

He would speak the decisive word to silence offensive tongues. But, as a protest, she still stayed retreated in the cottage; serve them right in the village that she withheld herself from the inquisitive eyes down there. On Friday morning the milkman told her that Mr. Lewis had had a tidy-sized funeral the previous day. She was relieved to hear he was safely in the earth, which was the home of forgetfulness and which, in due course, turned even the most disagreeable things sweet. After the milkman had gone she mixed herself a cake of festival richness, and so victorious did she feel that she decided to put an end to her haughty exile on Sunday evening and go to chapel as usual; dropping yet another egg in the bowl, she saw herself arriving at the last minute and marching to her pew in the front with head held high in rescued virtue.

On Saturday morning the postman, arriving late at her out-of-the-way cottage, threw a letter inside her door. A quarter of an hour later, agitated of face, she flew from the cottage on her bicycle. The village saw her speeding through without a look from her bent-over head. She shot past the Post Office, Horeb chapel, the inn, the row of cottages where the nobodies lived, past the house of Wmffre, the triple-crowned bard whose lays of local lore deserved to be better known, past the houses of Mr. Davies, B.A., and Mrs. Williams Flannel, who had spoken on the radio about flannel-weaving, past the cottage of Evans the Harpist and Chicago Jenkins, who had been in jail in that place, and, ringing

her bell furious, spun in greased haste over the cross-roads where, in easier times, they hanged men for sheep stealing. She got out on to the main road without molestation.

"Judging," remarked Mrs. Harpist Evans in the Post Office, "by the way her legs were going on that bike the strain in her inside has repaired quite well."

It was nine miles to the market town where Vaughan the solicitor had his office, which on Saturday closed at midday. She stamped up the stairs, burst into an outer room, and demanded of a frightened youth that Mr. Vaughan attend to her at once. So distraught was she that the youth skedaddled behind a partition of frosted glass, came back, and took her into the privacy where Mr. Vaughan, who was thin as a wasp and had a black hat on his head, hissed: "What are you wanting? Closing time it is." Catherine, heaving and choking, threw down the letter on his desk and, after looking at it, he said, flat: "Well, you can't have it yet. Not till after probate. You go back home and sit quiet for a few weeks." Accustomed to the hysteria of legatees, and indeed of non-legatees, he turned his back on her and put a bunch of keys in his pocket.

She panted and perspired. And, pushing down her breasts, she drew out her voice, such as it was—"Oh, Mr. Vaughan," she whimpered, "it is not the money I want. Come I have to ask you to let this little business be shut up close as a grave." A poor misused woman in mortal distress, she wiped sweat and tears off her healthy country-red cheeks.

"What are you meaning?" He whisked about impatient, for at twelve-five, in the bar-parlour of the Blue Boar, he always met the manager of the bank for conference over people's private business.

She hung her head ashamed-looking as she moaned: "A little favourite of Mr. Lewis I was, me always giving him flowers and vegetables and what-not free of charge. But bad tongues there are in Banog, and they will move quick if news of this money will go about."

"Well," he said, flat again, "too late you are. There is Mrs. Lewis herself knowing about your legacy since Thursday evening, and——"

Catherine burst out: "But *she* will keep quiet for sure! She won't be wanting it talked that her husband went and left me

three hundred pounds, no indeed! For *I* can say things that poor Mr. Lewis told me, such a nasty she was! It is of Horeb chapel I am worrying—for you not to tell Mr. Davies our minister or anyone else that I have been left this money." She peeped up at him humble.

"Well," he said, even flatter than before and, as was only proper, not sympathetic, "too late you are again. Same time that I wrote to you I sent a letter to Mr. Davies that the chapel is left money for a new organ and Miss Catherine Bowen the cleaner left a legacy too: the letter is with him this morning. In the codicil dealing with you, Mr. Lewis said it was a legacy because your cleaning wage was so small and you a good worker."

The excuse would have served nice but for that unlucky death on her bed. She groaned aloud. And as she collapsed on the solicitor's hard chair she cried out in anguish, entreating aid of him in this disaster. Pay him well she would if he preserved her good name, pounds and pounds.

"A miracle," he said, "I cannot perform."

Truth, when it is important, is not mocked for long, even in a solicitor's office. The legatee went down the stairs with the gait of one whipped sore. She cycled back to her cottage as though using only one leg, and, to avoid the village, she took a circuitous way, pushing the cycle up stony paths. At the cottage, after sitting in a trance for a while, she walked whimpering to the well among the chrysanthemums, removed the cover, and sat on the edge in further trance. An hour passed, for her thoughts hung like lead. She went into the dark night of the soul. But she couldn't bring herself to urge her body into the round black hole which pierced the earth so deep.

Then, on the horizon of the dark night, shone a ray of bright light. For the first time since the postman's arrival the solid untrimmed fact struck her that three hundred pounds of good money was hers. She could go to Aberystwyth and set up in partnership with her friend Sally Thomas who, already working there as a cook, wanted to start lodgings for the college students. The legacy, surprising because Mr. Lewis had always been prudent of pocket—and she had approved of this respect for cash, believing, with him, that the best things in life are Free—the legacy would take her into a new life. She rose from the well. And in the cottage, shaking herself finally out of her black dream, she

decided that Mr. Lewis had left her the money as a smack to his wife the nasty one.

No one came to see her. She did not go to chapel on the Sunday. Three days later she received a letter from Mr. Davies, B.A., inviting her to call at his house. She knew what it meant. The minister had sat with his deacons in special conclave on her matter, and he was going to tell her that she was to be cast out from membership of Horeb. She wrote declining the invitation and said she was soon to leave Banog to live at the seaside in quiet; she wrote to Sally Thomas at the same time. But she had to go down to the Post Office for stamps.

She entered the shop with, at first, the mien of an heiress. Two women members of Horeb were inside, and Lizzie Postmistress was slicing bacon. Catherine stood waiting at the Post Office counter in the corner. No one greeted her or took notice, but one of the customers slipped out and in a few minutes returned with three more women. All of them turned their backs on Catherine. They talked brisk and loud, while Catherine waited drawn up. Lizzie Postmistress sang: "Fancy Lewis the Chandler leaving money for a new organ for Horeb!"

"The deacons," declared the wife of Peter the Watercress, "ought to say 'No' to it."

"Yes, indeed," nodded the cobbler's wife; "every time it is played members will be reminded."

"Well," said single Jane the Dressmaker, who had a tape-measure round her neck, "not the fault of the organ will that be."

They clustered before the bacon-cutting postmistress. On a tin of biscuits, listening complacent, sat a cat. The postmistress stopped slicing, waved her long knife, and cried: "Never would I use such an organ—no, not even with gloves on; and *I* for one won't like singing hymns to it."

"A full members' meeting about *all* the business there ought to be! Deacons are men. Men go walking to look at dahlias and fuchsias——"

"And," dared the cobbler's wife, "drop dead at sight of a prize dahlia."

Catherine rapped on the counter and shouted: "Stamps!"

The postmistress craned her head over the others and exclaimed: "Why now, there's Catherine Fuchsias! . . . Your

inside is better from the strain?" she enquired. The others turned and stared in unison.

"Stamps!" said Catherine, who under the united scrutiny suddenly took on a meek demeanour.

"Where for?" asked the postmistress, coming over to the Post Office corner, and snatching up the two letters Catherine had laid on the counter. "Ho, one to Mr. Davies, B.A., and one to Aberystwyth!"

"I am going to live in Aberystwyth," said Catherine grandly.

"Retiring you are on your means?" asked Jane the Dressmaker.

"Plenty of college professors and well-offs in Aberystwyth!" commented Peter's wife.

"Well," frowned the postmistress, as if in doubt about her right to sell stamps to such a person, "I don't know indeed. . . . What you wasting a stamp on this one for," she rapped out, "with Mr. Davies living just up the road? Too much money you've got?"

"Ten shillings," complained unmarried Jane the Dressmaker, "I get for making up a dress, working honest on it for three days or more. Never will *I* retire to Aberystwyth and sit on the front winking at the sea."

"What you going there so quick for?" asked the cobbler's wife, her eyes travelling sharp from Catherine's face to below and resting there suspicious.

"Two stamps." The postmistress flung them down grudgingly at last, and took up Catherine's coin as if she was picking up a rotten mouse by the tail. "Wishing I am you'd buy your stamps somewhere else."

Catherine, after licking and sticking them, seemed to regain strength as she walked to the door, remarking haughtily: "There's wicked jealousy when a person is left money! Jealous you are not in my shoes, now *and* before."

But, rightly, the postmistress had the last word: "A cousin I have in Aberystwyth. Wife of a busy minister that is knowing everybody there. A letter *I* must write to Aberystwyth too."

Boy with a Trumpet

ALL HE WANTED WAS A BED, a shelf for his trumpet and permission to play it. He did not care how squalid the room, though he was so clean and shining himself; he could afford only the lowest rent. Not having any possessions except what he stood up in, the trumpet in an elegant case and a paper parcel of shirts and socks, landladies were suspicious of him. But he so gleamed with light young vigour, like a feather in the wind, that he kindled even in those wary hearts less harsh refusals.

Finally, on the outer rim of the West End, he found a bleak room for eight shillings a week in the house of a faded actress purply with drink and the dramas of a succession of lovers.

"I don't mind a trumpet," she said, mollified by his air of a waif strayed out of a lonely vacancy. "Are you in the orchestra, dear? No! You're not in a jazz band, are you? I can't have night-club people in my house, coming in at all hours. No? . . . You look so young," she said wonderingly. "Well, there's no attendance, my charwoman is on war work; the bathroom is strictly engaged every morning from ten to half-past, and I do not allow tenants to receive visitors of the opposite sex in their rooms." Behind the blowsiness were the remnants of one who had often played the role of a lady.

"I've just committed suicide," he said naïvely. She saw then the bright but withdrawn fixity of his eyes, single-purposed.

"What!" she said, flurried in her kimono, and instinctively placed a stagey hand on her bosom.

"They got me back," he said. "I was sick. I didn't swallow enough of the stuff. Afterwards they sent me to a—well, a hospital. Then they discharged me. From the Army."

"Oh dear!" she fussed. And, amply and yearning: "Did your nerve go, then? . . . Haven't you any people?" There had been a suicide—a successful one—in her house before, and she had not been averse to the tragedy.

"I have God," he said gravely. "I was brought up in an orphanage. But I have an aunt in Chester. She and I do not love each other. I don't like violence. The telephone is ringing," he said, with his alert but withdrawn awareness.

She scolded someone, at length and with high-toned emphasis, and returning muttering; she started to find him still under the huge frilled lampshade by the petunia divan. "Rent is in advance," she said mechanically. "Number eight on the second floor."

He went up the stairs. The webby carpet, worn by years of lodgers, smelt of old dust. A gush of water sounded above; a door slammed; a cat slept on a window-sill under sprays of dusty lacquered leaves. Later, as he was going out to the teashop, two young girls, silent and proud, sedately descended the stairs together in the dying sunshine. They, too, had that air of clear-cut absorption in themselves, unacknowledging the dangerous world. But they were together in that house of the unanchored. And he was alone, not long back from the edge of the dead land, the intersecting country where the disconnected sit with their spectral smiles.

That evening, in the tiny room, he played his trumpet. His lips, as the bandmaster of his regiment had told him, were not suitable for a trumpet; they had not the necessary full, fleshy contours, and also there were interstices in his front teeth; his face became horribly contorted in his effort to blast 'Cherry Ripe' out of the silver instrument. Nevertheless, when the benevolent spinster in the cathedral town where he had been stationed and sung Elizabethan madrigals asked what she could buy him after he had left the asylum, he said: "A trumpet." And, alone, he had come to the great city with his neurosis and a gleaming second-hand trumpet costing sixteen guineas. On arrival he spent half his money on four expensive poplin shirts and in the evening went to a lecture on world reform; the night he had spent in Regent's Park, his trumpet case and parcel on his lap.

The landlady rapped and came in. Violet circles were painted round her eyes and her hair was greenish. Within a wrap large, loose breasts swam untrammelled as dolphins. She looked at him with a speculative doubt.

"It's very noisy. Are you practising? There are neighbours."

"You said I could play my trumpet," he pointed out gravely.

She said: "I am artistic myself, and I have had actors, writers, and musicians in my house. But there's a limit. You must have a certain hour for practice. But not in the evenings; the mornings are more suitable for a trumpet."

"I cannot get up in the mornings," he said. The trim, fixed

decision of the young soldier stiffened his voice. "I need a great deal of sleep."

"Are you still ill?" She stepped forward, her ringed hands outstretched. He sat on the bed's edge in his clean new shirt, the trumpet across his knees. From him came a desolate waif need. But his round, fresh-air face had a blank imperviousness, and down his indrawn small eyes flickered a secret repudiation. "Are you lonely?" she went on. "I play the piano."

"I don't like trembling young girls," he said. But as if to himself: "They make me unhappy. I usually burst into crying when I'm with them. But I like babies; I want to be a father. I used to go into the married quarters in barracks and look after the babies. . . . Sometimes," he said, with his grave simplicity, "I used to wash their napkins."

In her slovenly fashion she was arrantly good-natured and friendly. "Did you have a bad time in the orphanage, dear?"

"No, not *bad*. But I cannot stand the smell of carbolic soap now; it makes me want to vomit. . . . I would like," he added, "to have known my mother. Or my father."

"Hasn't anyone ever cared for you?" she asked, heaving.

"Yes. Both girls and men. But only for short periods." Detached, he spoke as if he would never question the reason for this. The antiseptic austerity of his early years enclosed him like a cell of white marble; later there had been the forced, too early physical maturity of the Army, which the orphanage governor had induced him to join as a bandboy, just before the war. He had no instinctive love to give out in return for attempts of affection: it had never been born in him. "People get tired of me," he added, quite acceptingly.

After that, in her erratic fashion, he obsessed her. She occasionally fed him; in his room she put cushions and a large oleograph of Dante and Beatrice on a Florence bridge; she even allowed him to play the trumpet when he liked, despite complaints from the other lodgers. She badgered her lover of the moment, an irate designer of textiles, to find him a job in the studio of the huge West End store. But the boy categorically refused all jobs that required him before noon. His head like an apple on the pillow, he lay in bed all the morning sunk in profound slumber.

In the afternoons he would sit at his window drinking her tea or earnestly reading a modern treatise on religious problems. He

insisted to her that a fresh upsurge of religious awareness was about to arrive in the world. He had already passed through the hands of a hearty, up-to-date Christian group, and he corresponded regularly with a canon whose sole panacea, however, was an exhortation to pray.

"But I can't pray," he grieved to her. There was a deadlock of all his faculties.

Only when playing his trumpet he seemed a little released. Harshly and without melodic calm, he blew it over a world in chaos. For all the contortions of his round face he bloomed into a kind of satisfaction as he created a hideous pattern of noise. Cast out of the Army as totally unfit for service, it was only in these blasts of noise that he really enjoyed his liberty—the first that had ever come to him.

"Your rent is a fortnight overdue," she reminded him, with prudent urgency. "You really must find work, dear. Think of your future; now is your opportunity,with so many jobs about."

"What future?" he asked curiously. "Why do you believe so confidently in the future?"

He could always deflate her with this grave flatness. But her habit of working up emotional scenes was not easily balked. She would call him into her sitting-room and, stroking his hand, among the billowy cushions, heave and throb about the rudeness of her lover, who was younger than herself. "We are two waifs," she said, while the telephone concealed under the crinoline of a doll rang yet again.

But he did not want the sultry maternalness of this faded, artificial woman; unerringly he sensed the shallow, predatory egotism of her need. Yet neither did he want to know the two beautiful and serious girls, flaxen-haired and virginal, who lived on the same floor; he always ducked his head away from them. He wanted to pick up a prostitute and spend a furtive quarter of an hour with her in the black-out. But he could not afford this. He was destitute now.

"You are horrible," she exclaimed angrily when, in a long talk, he told her of this. "You, a boy of nineteen, wanting to go with prostitutes!"

"You see," he insisted, "I would feel myself master with them, and I can hate them too. But with nice, proud girls I cannot stop myself breaking down, and then I want to rush away and throw

myself under a Tube train. . . . And that's bad for me," he added, with that earnest naïveté of his.

"But *is* it bad for you to break down?" she asked with some energy.

"Yes; I can't stand it." Beyond the fixed calm of his small crystal eyes something flickered. "When I was discharged from the Army the M.O. advised me to attend a clinic. I've been to one. It made me feel worse. I don't want to feel I'm a case."

"The clinic," she said sagely, "couldn't be expected to provide you with a mother. You've got nineteen years of starvation to forget."

She had got into the habit of giving him a glass of milk and rum at nights. Nevertheless, she had her real angers with him, for she was of tempestuous disposition. She knew that he would not—it did not occur to her that he could not—unfold to her other than in these talks. He did not weep on her waiting bosom; he did not like his bright glossy hair to be stroked. And sometimes when he played the trumpet in his room she was roused to a transport of queer, intent fury and she would prowl about the staircase in helpless rage.

He had been in the house a month when one afternoon, after he had been playing for an hour, she walked into his room. Her green hair was frizzed out, the heavily painted eyes sidled angrily, the violet lips twisted like a cord. There was something both pathetic and ridiculous in the frenzy of this worn and used woman gallantly trying to keep up an air of bygone theatrical grandeur and, indeed, of ladylike breeding. But she was so brittle. Carefully looking at her, he laid the trumpet on his knees.

"Why must you *keep on*!" she fumed. "That everlasting tune, it's maddening. The neighbours will ring up the police and I shall have them calling. You are not in a slum."

"You said I could play my trumpet."

And still there was about him that curious and impervious tranquillity, not to be disturbed, and, to her, relentless. It drove her to a vindictive outburst, her gaze fixed in hatred on the trumpet.

"Why don't you go out and look for *work*? Your rent—you are taking advantage of my kindness; you are lazy and without principle. Aren't you ashamed to sit there doing nothing but blowing noises on that damned thing?" She heaved over him in the

narrow room, a dramatic Mænad gone to copious seed and smelling of bath salts.

He got up from the bed's edge, carefully disconnected the trumpet's pieces and put them in the elegant case and his shirts and socks into a brown paper carrier. She watched him, spellbound; his crisp, deliberate decision was curbing. At the door he raised his hat politely. All recognition of her was abolished from the small, unswerving eyes.

"Good afternoon," he said in a precise way. "I will send you the rent when I earn some money. I am sure to find a position suited to me before long."

He stored the trumpet in a railway station. On no account would he pawn it, though there was only a shilling or two left of the pound the canon had last sent him, together with a copy of *St. Augustine's Confessions*. He knew it was useless to look for a job even as second trumpet in the cabarets; not even his fresh, shiny, boy appearance, that would look well in a Palm Beach jacket, could help him.

That night he hung about the dark, chattering Circus, not unhappy, feeling vaguely liberated among this anonymous crowd milling about in an atmosphere of drink, flesh, and boredom. He listened carefully to the soldiers' smudged catcalls, the female retaliations, the whispers, the ironical endearments, the dismissals. But as the night wore on and the crowd thinned, his senses became sharpened, alert, and at the same time desperate. Like a young hungry wolf sniffing the edge of the dark, he howled desolately inside himself. In the black-out the perfumed women, dots of fire between their fingertips, passed and repassed, as if weaving a dance figure in some hieratic ceremony; his mind became aware of a pattern, a design, a theme in which a restated lewd note grew ever more and more dominant. He wanted to play his trumpet. Startle the night with a barbaric blast.

He began to accost the women. He had heard that some would give shelter to the temporarily destitute, exercising a legendary comradeship of the streets. But none had use for him. After a brief assessment of his conversation they passed on rapidly. Only one was disposed to chatter. She told him he could find a job, if his discharge papers were in order, as a stagehand in a certain theatre; she gave him a name to ask for.

"Nothing doing, darling," she replied promptly to his subsequent suggestion. "No fresh pineapple for me to-night."

Waiting for morning, he sat on a bench in the ghostly Square garden and returned to an earlier meditation on the nature of God. In this mental fantasy he continually saw the embryo of a tadpole which split into two entities. The force that divided the embryo was God, a tremendous deciding power that lay beyond biology. It was eternal and creative, yet could one pray to it, worship it? Would it be conscious of a worshipping acknowledgement, and, if so, could it reward with peace, harmony, and contentment? He ached to submerge himself in belief and to enter into a mystic identification with a creative force; he wanted to cast himself at the knees of a gigantic parent of the universe. But on every side were frustrations, and the chaotic world, armed for destruction, was closing in on him triumphantly. Yet he knew it was that creative force that had driven him to attempt suicide as a solution and a release; he had believed that the power within him would not die but return to the central force and be discharged again. But he shivered at the memory of the hours before that act of suicide, those furtive, secret hours that had ruptured his mind. Outside himself he had never been able to kill even a spider.

"You must think of your future!" he suddenly whinnied aloud, causing a bemused sailor on an adjacent bench to lift his round cap off his face. He tried to envisage a concrete picture of that future, but saw only a ravaged place of waste with a few tufts of blackened vegetation against a burnt-out sky.

He began working among acres of painted canvases depicting idealised scenes in a world devoted to song, hilarity, and dance. Rainbow processions of girls passed in and out, pearly smiles stitched into glossy faces, the accurate legs swinging like multi-coloured sausages. Watching these friezes in tranced gravity, he sometimes missed a cue, rousing the stage manager to threats of instant dismissal, despite the labour shortage. The hard-working young girl dancers, lustrously trim and absorbed in professional perfection, took no notice of the new stagehand fascinated in attempts to adapt their integrated patterns to his consciousness. But though hypnotised by this new revelation of idealised flesh

and movements, he still could not identify himself with them. He was still cut off, he had not yet come through to acceptance that the world breathed, and that these pink and silver girls actually could be touched.

He started and listened carefully when a distinguished young man, a hero of the sky, sent a message backstage that he "would like to collaborate" with a certain starry beauty of the chorus. "She'll collaborate all right," remarked another of the girls in the wings; "I never heard it called that before." That night he went home straight from the theatre and filled the house with the blasts of his trumpet.

He had rented a small partitioned space in the basement, its window overlooking the back garden. It contained a camp-bed and one or two bugs which he accepted as outcomes of the God-force. The street was not of good repute, but it was beyond the West End, and an amount of lace-curtained and fumed-oak respectability was maintained.

"You can blow your trumpet as much as you like," Irish Lil said. "Blow it in the middle of the night if you like—it might drive some of the bastards out. Can you lend me five bob till tomorrow morning?"

There had been a quarrel among the five prostitutes upstairs: four accused the fifth of bringing in clients during the daytime—they declared the house would get a bad name. They were entirely daughters of the night; in daylight there was a moon glisten on their waxen faces, their hair looked unreal, and their voices were huskily fretful. They called him the Boy with a Trumpet, and he was already something of a pet among them. He shared the roomy basement with four refugees off the Continent who came and went on obscure errands and everlastingly cooked cabbage soup.

Irish Lil was the disgrace of the house. Though she always had real flowers stuck in the two milk bottles on her sideboard, she was a slut. Her slovenly make-up, her regular Q.M.S. lover in the Guards who got roaring drunk, and her inability to discriminate and to insist on pre-payment angered the four younger women. Blonde Joyce carried on a year-old vendetta with her. Over a stolen egg. Irish Lil was creeping downstairs one evening with the egg, which she had taken from Joyce's room, when a bomb fell in the Avenue. Kathleen rushed out of her room with

a Free French client and found Lil struck daft on the stairs with the crushed egg dribbling through her fingers.

"Don't trust your trumpet to her," Joyce said. "She'll pawn it." For, as his room had no lock, he asked where in the house he could hide his trumpet while he was at the theatre.

"She weeps," he said gravely. "I've heard her weeping."

"If," Joyce said, hard, "she was on fire, I wouldn't pee on her to put her out."

But they all, in their idle afternoons, liked him about their rooms. He fetched them newspapers and cigarettes; he was a nice boy and, yawning in their dressing-gowns and irremediably nocturnal, they discarded their professionalism with him. Their calm acceptance of the world as a disintegration eased him; his instinct had been right in seeking a brothel to live in.

Yet he saw the house, for all its matter-of-fact squalor, as existing in a world still spectral to him. Still he lived behind thick glass, unreleased and peering out in dumb waiting. Only his old Army nightmare was gone—the recurrent dream in which he lay sealed tight into a leaden pipe under a pavement where he could hear, ever passing and returning, the heeltaps of compassionate but unreachable women. But the tank-like underwater quiet of the observation ward in the asylum was still with him, always. And he could not break through, smash the glass. Not yet.

It was Kathleen who took quite a fancy to him. They had disconnected conversations in her room; she accepted him amicably as a virginal presence that did not want to touch her. She was plump as a rose, and a sprinkle of natural colour was still strewn over her, the youngest girl in the house. She promised to try to find him a job as trumpeter in one of the clubs; he could earn a pound a night at this if he became proficient.

"But I don't want to earn a lot of money," he said earnestly. "It's time we learned how to do without money. We must learn to live and create like God."

"I've met all types of men," she said vaguely, tucking her weary legs under her on the bed. "And I hate them all. I tell you I've got to have six double gins before I can bring one home. That costs them a quid or two extra; I make the sods spend."

He said dreamily: "When I took poison I felt I was making a creative act, if it was only that I was going out to search." He

could still rest in the shade of that release; the mysteriousness of that blue underworld fume was still there, giving him a promise of fulfilment. "I saw huge shapes . . . they were like huge flowers, dark and heavy blood-coloured flowers. They looked at me, they moved, they listened, their roots began to twine into me, I could feel them in my bowels. . . . But I couldn't rise, I was lying in the mud. I couldn't breathe in the new way. I tried to struggle up . . . through. But I fell back, and everything disappeared——"

"Don't you go trying to commit suicide in this house," she said. "Mrs. Walton would never forgive you. That Irish tyke's doing enough to advertise us already. . . . You're not queer, are you?" she asked, desultory. "I like queer men, they don't turn me sick. . . . Always at one," she ruminated of the others.

She attracted him more than the other four, but, to content his instinct completely, he wished her more sordid, lewd, and foul-tongued, more disintegrated. The ghostly lineaments of a trembling young girl remained in her. They conversed to each other across a distance. But she was the only one of the women who still appeared to observe things beyond this private world of the brothel. He sometimes tried to talk to her about God.

The taxicabs began to purr up to the front door any time after midnight. Sometimes he got out of his bed in the basement, mounted the staircase in trousers and socks, and stood poised in the dark as if waiting for a shattering revelation from behind the closed doors. There was the useless bomber pilot who broke down and shouted weepingly to Joyce that his nerve was gone —"Well," Joyce had said in her ruthless way, "you can stay if you like, but I'm keeping my present all the same, mind!" That pleased him, as he carefully listened; it belonged to the chaos, the burnt-out world reduced to charcoal. He laughed softly to himself. What if he blew his trumpet on this phantasmagoric staircase? Blew it over the fallen night, waken these dead, surprise them with a new anarchial fanfare?

One week when the elder tree and the peonies were in blossom in the once-cultivated back garden, Irish Lil declared she had a birthday. She opened her room on the Monday night—always an off night—to whoever wished to come in. Ranks of beer flagons stood on the sideboard, and Harry, her Guards sergeant regular, roared and strutted before them in his battle-dress like David before the Ark. Three refugees from the basement ventured in;

Joyce forgot her vendetta, but refused to dress or make up; Pamela sat repairing a stocking. When he arrived from the theatre the beer was freely flowing. Irish Lil, in a magenta sateen gown, was wearing long, ornate earrings in a vain attempt to look seductive. Kathleen, on this off-night occasion, gazed at him with a kind of sisterly pensiveness.

"Heard that one about Turnham Green——?" bawled Harry, and took off his khaki blouse before telling it, owing to the heat.

He was a great tree of flesh. His roots were tenacious in the earth. The juice in his full lips was the blood of a king bull; the seeds of war flourished in the field of his muscular belly. For him a battle was a dinner, a bomb a dog bark, a bayonet a cat scratch, and in the palm of his great blue paw statesmen curled secure. He was the salt of the earth. The limericks flying off his lips became more obscene.

But they fell flat. The prostitutes were bored with obscenity, the refugees did not understand English humour. Joyce yawned markedly.

"Hell, what's this?" Harry panted a bit—"The funeral of the duchess? . . . Reminds me. Heard that one about Her Grace and the fishmonger?"

"Fetch your trumpet, will you?" asked Irish Lil, feeling a little music was necessary.

"What!" shouted Harry, delighted. "He's got a trumpet? I been in the band in my time. A kick or two from a trumpet's jest what's needed."

He snatched the beautifully shining instrument and set it to his great curled lips. The bull neck swelled, the huge face glowed red. And without mistake, unfalteringly, from harmonious lungs, he played the 'Londonderry Air'. A man blowing a trumpet successfully is a rousing spectacle. The blast is an announcement of the lifted sun. Harry stood on a mountain peak, monarch of all he surveyed.

Kathleen came in, hesitating, and sat beside him on the camp-bed. "What's the matter?" she asked. He had flung away with the trumpet as soon as Harry had laid it down. He sat concentratedly polishing it with a bit of chiffon scarf she had once given him, especially the mouthpiece. "Has he spoilt it, then?" she murmured.

He did not answer. But his fingers were trembling. She said wearily: "He's started reciting 'Eskimo Nell' now."

"I wish I could play like him," he whispered.

"You do make an awful noise," she said in a compassionate way. "You haven't got the knack yet, with all your practising . . . I wonder," she brooded after a while, "if it's worth going down West. But they're so choosy on a Monday night."

"Don't go." He laid down the trumpet as if abandoning it for ever. "Don't go."

She seemed not to be listening, her preoccupied eyes gazing out of the window. The oblong of garden was filled with the smoky red after-fume of sunset. Their low voices drifted into silences. Two pigeons gurgled in the elder tree; a cat rubbed against the window-pane and became intent on the pigeons. Kathleen's mouth was pursed up thoughtfully. He was conscious of the secret carnation glow of her thighs. Her thick hair smelled of obliterating night.

"I won't ever play my trumpet." His voice stumbled. "I have no faith, no belief, and I can't accept the world . . . I can't *feel* it."

"Christ, there's enough to feel," she protested. "This bloody war, and the bombs——"

"In the Army they taught us to get used to the smell of blood. It smells of hate. . . . And to turn the bayonet deep in the guts. . . . There were nice chaps in our battalion who had letters and parcels from home . . . from loving mothers and girls . . . and they didn't mind the blood and the bayonets; they had had their fill of love and faith, I suppose. But I was hungry all the time, I wanted to be fed, and I wanted to create, and I wanted children. . . . I am incomplete," he whispered—"I didn't have the right to kill."

"But you tried to kill yourself," she pointed out, though vaguely, as if her attention was elsewhere.

"My body," he said—"that *they* owned."

"Well, what can you *do?*" she asked, after another silence. "You ought to take up some study, a boy with your brains. . . . It's a shame," she cried, with a sudden burst of the scandalised shrillness of her kind: "the Army takes 'em, breaks 'em, and chucks 'em out when they've got no further use for 'em. . . . What *can* you do?"

"There's crime," he said.

"It don't pay," she said at once.

"I believe," he said, "there'll be big waves of crime after the war. You can't have so much killing, so much teaching to destroy, and then stop it suddenly. . . . The old kinds of crime, and new crimes against the holiness in the heart. There'll be fear, and shame, and guilt, guilt. People will be mad. There's no such thing as victory in war. There's only misery, chaos and suffering for everybody, and then the payment. . . . There's only one victory —over the evil in the heart. And that's a rare miracle." His voice faltered in defeat. "I've been trying to make the attempt. But the air I breathe is full of poison."

She let him talk, pretending to listen. Clients sometimes talked to her oddly and, if there was time, it was professional tact to allow them their airings.

"Harry, up there," he went on dejectedly, "carries the world on his shoulders. But he'll rob his mother and starve his wife and pick his neighbour's pocket." He took up the trumpet off the bed, turned it over regretfully, and let it drop back. "I can't even play my trumpet like him," he reiterated obsessively. "Would I make a better criminal?"

"Now, look here," she said, her attention arrested, "don't you go starting down *that* street! Boys like you alone in London can soon go to the bad. I've seen some of it. It won't pay, I'm telling you."

"But crime as a protest," he said earnestly. "As a relief. And don't you see there's nothing but crime now, at the heart of things?"

Professionally comforting, she laid her hand on his, which began to tremble again. Yet his small crystal eyes remained impervious, with their single-purposed rigidity. She stroked his hand. "Don't tremble, don't tremble. . . . Do you ever cry?" she asked, gazing into his face in the last light.

He shook his head. "I can't." But something was flickering into his eyes. He had leaned towards her slowly.

"If you could," she said, but still with a half-vague inattentiveness—"I'm sure you ought to break down. You're too shut in on yourself."

He breathed her odour of flesh. It seemed to him like the scent of milky flowers, living and benign, scattered in a pure air. As if

it would escape him, he began to breathe it hungrily. His hands had stopped trembling. But the rigid calm of his appearance, had she noticed it in the dusky light, was more disquieting.

"There!" she said, still a little crouched away from him; "you see, a little personal talk is good for you. You're too lonely, that's what it is."

"Will you let me——"

"What?" she asked, more alert. The light was finishing; her face was dim.

"Put my mouth to your breast?"

"No," she said at once. She shook her head. "It wouldn't be any use, anyhow."

But, now that the words were out, he fell on her in anguish. "Stay with me! Don't go away. Sleep with me tonight." He pressed his face into her, shuddering, and weeping at last. "Stay!"

She heaved herself free, jumping off the bed with a squirm, like anger. "Didn't I tell you that I hated men!" She raised her voice, very offended. "I could spit on them all—and you, too, now." She opened the door. "But I will say this"—her voice relented a degree—"I wouldn't sleep with you if you offered me ten pounds! I know what I am, and I don't want any of your fancy stuff." She flounced out with scandalised decision.

He rolled over and over on the bed. Shuddering, he pressed his face into the pillow. When the paroxysm had passed he half rose and sat looking out of the window. In his movement the trumpet crashed to the floor, but he did not pick it up. He sat gazing out into the still world as if he would never penetrate it again. He saw grey dead light falling over smashed cities, over broken precipices and jagged torn chasms of the world. Acrid smoke from abandoned ruins mingled with the smell of blood. He saw himself the inhabitant of a wilderness where withered hands could lift in guidance no more. There were no more voices and all the paps of earth were dry.

The Nature of Man

THOUGH CATTI FOUND THAT DAN THE CARRIER FITTED HER NATURE like a key fits its lock, in the end she chose Selwyn, who was the fishmonger in the little market town six miles away. She decided (though in a temper) that her trim body, her smooth calves, her cowslip-yellow hair and her mouthful of glittering teeth deserved something better than Dan's half-a-crown cottage slunk down at the edge of a lonely wood and smelling of mice and winter mildew. The evening she made up her mind she went down to the cottage where Dan had lived alone since his parents' death, and from the patch of garden shouted at him through the open window:

"Come out of there, you old sluggard, and listen to a lady."

When the great hook of his nose came out of the door, she went on:

"Give me back the broidered spread I broidered last winter. No wedding for you and me, you snail. Month after next I'm marrying Selwyn the Fish, so there!" And she snapped her fingers at him, still in a temper.

Dan, swarthy of hair and skin as a gipsy, bared his yellow eyes. Just by the front door was the butt that caught the thatch drippings. In a flash he scooped a pan of water and sprung it over her as, too late, she jumped back.

"Go and marry the dirty mackerel!" he shouted in fury. "Be off!" He scooped another panful.

She picked out a stone from the black loam and threw it at him, hitting his chest. She dodged the second lot of water but did not leave the garden. He remained on the doorstep, his muscled belly heaving up out of his loose-strapped corduroys. But he threw no more water; as the month had been dry, a pity to waste it on this baggage of a turncoat.

"The banns going to be read next Sunday," she screeched. "A tidy wedding I'm having. So there! Good riddance of a courter that got no more ambition than a rabbit!" Her yellow hair sprang about like wheat in wind: his yellow eyes danced in answering rage.

"Go and marry a shifty townee," he roared. "A couple of bad eggs, the both of you."

"Jealous!" she sang in vengeful delight. "Give me back my broidered spread. For wife, one-legged old Mari is proper value for you."

Six yards between them, and approaching no nearer, they continued in abuse. But he had no intention of yielding up the spread of blue cloth, embroidered with jays, red lilies and flying swans, which she had given him not long ago, saying it was for their wedding bed. One day it might fetch a good price in the market.

At last, with final jeers at the stick-in-the-mud blockhead, his poverty and his paltry cottage, she went skipping into the road. Dan's pony, from the paddock beside the cottage, watched her speculatively as she climbed the short height to the village. The evening was darkening. Dan slammed his door, lit a candle, and with an oath stamped his foot on a cockroach.

Her complaints were the uproar of love kept waiting. Dan, with his country slowness and caution, had dithered because of his inability to decide whether to buy a motor-van before marriage or not. For himself he was satisfied with the old pony and cart, and he clung obstinately to them. But Catti's taunts at his lack of ambition had kept him fixed in a dilemma, so that the date of their wedding was for ever being postponed.

Also she wanted him to move out of the ancient cottage that had belonged to his family for two hundred years, and go to live in the market town where, so she declared, his carrier business must surely grow, aided by a motor-van. But he was quite satisfied with carrying for the village, and his legs were like roots in the cottage of his fathers, where his childhood smelt sweet.

They had courted for five years, walking in the woods and nearly always quarrelling, like demons that cannot part. She was an orphan and milked the cows up in Trecornel farm. He knew that on market day Selwyn the fishmonger had cast his greedy drunkard eyes on the way Catti skipped about the town, her bosom before her like a basket of peaches.

But he was startled to find that this time her threats were true. She married the fishmonger and went to live above his shop, in the babbling town that was divided by azure streaks of river and where there was a famous ruined castle and a cinema opened three

evenings a week. The day she was married she passed Dan's cottage on her way to the town; she passed in a tumbril in which was piled all her belongings. And though she saw him scowling behind the window curtains, oddly she did not scream a taunt or demand her broidered cloth on which she had spent months. She only showed her beautiful teeth in derision. Dressed in a grand gown and wearing stays, she was stiff with a new haughtiness.

That evening Dan chopped off the head of one of his best fowls, snatched out the feathers and entrails, roasted it before his fire and ate it in his hands. A gallon of beer went down his throat. Drunk, he sang songs to himself, in the shadowy candle-lit cottage, old rude songs that maligned women.

The first year or two of her marriage Catti queened it in the town, silks on her limbs which before had known only the bite of flannel. But soon her yellow hair began to fade and lie in limp untidy hanks about her thinning face. Up over the fish shop the marriage did not prosper. Selwyn, whose mouth always hung open like a little boy's, had no more brain than one of his dried sprats, and only in the whisky of the Shepherd's Staff inn across the road did he find some meaning to life. But perhaps it was the lack of harmony in his home life that drove him across the road oftener, so that the fish shop, never expertly managed, began to smell with stock allowed to go stale.

Upstairs, Catti tried to forget things by making herself fine clothes, which was a delight she had always coveted. But now she began to look like a dressed-up scarecrow, very gaunt, and all the untrammelled beauty of the old days was gone. Sometimes she wept, oftener she fell on Selwyn like a tumble of bricks, her tongue and fists full of hard blows.

Meanwhile Dan, as if in vengeance, began to prosper. He bought a motor-van on hire purchase, but he would not move from the dark black-beamed cottage where he stewed a pot for himself just the same. The colour of a smoked ham, and the great hook of his nose proud as a psalm, he began to look fierce and cruel. Shunning the inns now, he spent all his spare time carving knobs of wood into the likeness of animals. He bought himself an oil lamp, a set of knives, a chimney clock and, in a fit of extravagance, a gold ring.

Neither would he look at another woman. With his motor-van he was able to get round to half a dozen villages, collecting and

delivering fowls, eggs and vegetables all day long and every day now. As he prospered, some unmarried women, braving the fearsome cast of his face, endeavoured to be to him the lost Catti. But his manner with them remained stony.

Once when he passed the fish shop in his green van and saw Catti coming out of the door, sharp and angular as a scissors, he leaned out and bawled, derisive: "What price the stale mackerel are today, Mrs. Fish?"

She gazed after the bowling back-firing van with dilated eyes.

One blowy November night, about four years after her wedding, he slowly looked up from his wood-carving and saw her face staring in at the window. His lips drawn back in a grin and his hawk's beak poised over the wooden fox, he resumed work. She tapped the pane and called through the wind: "Let me in, Dan, let me warm myself by your fire."

"Be off!" he shouted. The door was unlocked but she would not enter it unasked.

"The wind is cold, Dan, and there's no food in me."

He looked up only once more, saw the dejected chin and the naked fleshless bones of her cheeks, and answered: "Shift yourself off. Back to your husband. Don't you stand there. Shall I call the policeman, then?"

She banged her fist against one of the lattice squares, smashing it. The blood ran down her hand. "The night is frozen," she wailed. "Drive me back in your motor, Dan!"

He blew out the lamp and locked the door. She heard him tramp upstairs to the bedroom. So over the road that wound through the skeleton wood she returned, walking the six miles to the town. She had set out whimpering to the place of her youth, after a bitter scene with Selwyn, who had drunk the day's takings, such as they were.

About a month later she appeared again, bedraggled and shivering. He grinned as she shouted her news through the window, for he knew already. "Selwyn is bankrupt, the shop closed today. No home have I got, only a mattress on the floor. Let me in, Dan."

He shouted back: "Mackerels got the deep ocean to dive in. Or walk the town you can with bells on your toes." He dare not close the curtains in case she smashed the window again. Eighteenpence the other pane had cost him.

Though her shriek had lost its old bounce, she demanded: "Give me my broidered spread. Money it's worth."

"Warm it keeps me at nights," he jeered.

"I will cook, sew, clean and wash for you," she begged again. "For no wages. And I will sleep on the mat of your hearth."

"Cosy ditches there are by the road," he laughed. Once more he locked the door, put out the light and tramped noisily upstairs.

She pressed her cheek against the wall of the cottage as if for warmth. And she crept down the black road. A week later her husband disappeared and she was fed and housed by the parish until she found low work in the kitchen of the town's hotel. The humiliation of this gnawed at her, for still she remembered the pride of her fine body and yellow hair, her silks and the soft strut of her bosom. And one bitter night in January she set out again to the place of her childhood, stealing there like a lean homeless hound, and obeying a need she could not control. Frost paled the road, the trees were crackling and writhing.

Dan was counting the month's money, ready to take to the bank next day. A crisp whisper of notes, pools of silver, an army of copper. His brown hands grasped the money, his beak took up the smell of the cash, now more delicious to him than the old perfume of her flesh. He did not turn when he heard her ghostly tapping on the window, but he scooped up a shower of silver and let it drip in the lamplight. He grinned.

"Dan," she called, humbly, "Catti wants to come in. Thirty-two she is, and you thirty-six, next birthday. Let us waste no more years, Dan, and let the years be pretty again. Fatten me, Dan, and put the cold out of my breast." She tapped the window gently; he did not look round. But he sang out:

"Go and find your haddock of a husband, down in the briny sea."

She called: "Your nice house I will sweeten, and cook you dishes every day. Gone is the old mischief and the evil old temper. You was for me and I was for you, Dan—don't you deny it now."

Putting the money in a leather bag and with never a glance at her, he shouted: "Be off. The tail end of a flatfish I do not fancy."

"Open the door," she wailed.

He put out the light, locked the door, and tramped upstairs. Bag of money under the bolster, he stretched into the flannel

quilts. Soon he was fast asleep among the warm feathers. Top of the quilts was her spread, bordered with the jays, red lilies and flying swans. Under it he slept all night like a hog.

In the morning he opened the front door and her body fell at his feet. Her blue face and hands gleamed with frost, her ashen hair crackled. He propped her against the frozen water-butt, locked the door and went in his van up to the policeman's cottage in the village.

"What do you think that old Catti has done, Emrys!" he complained. "Died on my doorstep! Best for you to speak on your 'phone and tell the parish to fetch her in their ambulance, for I am full up and very busy with crates of eggs and two dozen of poultry from Powell's farm."

The next market day he sold the spread cheap for ten shillings, so that memory of her should be quite wiped out. Catti was buried by the parish, and though in spring Dan painted his cottage outside a bright green, drank goat's milk every day, bought himself a new black suit and another watch, he became ill of a wasting complaint. The flash had gone out of his eye, the whip out of his tongue. His wood-carvings became clumsy and dropped from his dulled hand. He shuffled about as if there was nothing in this world to urge him put one foot before the other. Death's last stroke took him in the winter as he was driving the van down the village hill when he ought to have been in bed: the van crashed into a tree.

There was nobody to claim his money. Or the silent desolate cottage, where the rats began to leap on the empty bed.

Canute

As THE GREAT SATURDAY DREW NEARER most men asked each other: "Going up for the International?" You had the impression that the place would be denuded of its entire male population, as in some archaic tribal war. Of course a few women too intended taking advantage, for other purposes, of the cheap excursion trains, though these hardy souls were not treated seriously, but

rather as intruders in an entirely masculine rite. It was to be the eternal England versus Wales battle, the object now under dispute being a stitched leather egg containing an air-inflated bladder.

The special trains began to leave round about Friday midnight, and thereafter, all through the night and until Saturday noon, these quaking, immensely long vehicles feverishly rushed back and forth between Wales and London. In black mining valleys, on rustic heights, in market towns and calm villages myriads of house doors opened during the course of the night and a man issued from an oblong of yellow light, a railway ticket replacing the old spear.

The contingent from Pleasant Row, a respectable road of houses leading up to a three-shafted coal-mine, came out from their dwellings into the gas-lit winter midnight more or less simultaneously. Wives stood in worried farewells in the doorways. Their men were setting out in the dead of night to an alien land, far away from this safe valley where little Twlldu nestled about its colliery and usually minded its own business.

"Now be careful you don't lose your head, Rowland!" fretted his wife on their doorstep. "You take things quiet and behave yourself. Remember your trouble." The "trouble" was a hernia, the result of Rowland rescuing his neighbour, Dicky Corner House, from a fall of roof in the pit.

Rowland, grunting a repudiation of this anxiety, scuttled after a group of men in caps. "Jawl," shouted one, "is that the whistle of the 'scursion train? Come on!" Out of the corner house ran Dicky, tying a white muffler round his neck. Weighted though they all were with bottles for the long journey, they shot forward dramatically, though the train was still well up the long valley.

The night was clear and crisp. Thousands of stars briskly gazed down, sleepless as the excited eyes of the excursion hordes thronging all the valley's little stations. Stopping every few minutes, the train slid past mines deserted by their workers and rows of houses where, mostly, only women and children remained. It was already full when it stopped at Twlldu, and, before it left, the smallest men were lying in the luggage-racks and sitting on the floor, placing their bottles safe. Some notorious passengers, clubbing together, had brought crates of flagons.

Dicky Corner House, who was squat and sturdy, kept close to

Rowland, offering him cigarettes, or a swig out of his bottle and a beef sandwich. Ever since Rowland had rescued him he had felt bound to him in some way, especially as Rowland, who was not a hefty chap, had that hernia as a result. But Rowland felt no particular interest in Dicky; he had only done his duty by him in the pit. "Got my own bottle and sandwiches," he grunted. And: "No, I am not feeling a draught." The train rocked and groaned through the historic night. Some parts of it howled with song; in other parts bets were laid, cards played, and tales told of former Internationals.

Somewhere, perhaps guarded by armed warriors, the sacred egg lay waiting for the morrow. In its worship these myriads had left home and loved ones to brave the dangers of a foreign city. Situated in a grimy parish of that city, and going by the name of Paddington, the railway terminus began to receive the first drafts at about 4 a.m. Their arrival was welcomed by their own shouts, whistles and cries. From one compartment next to the Pleasant Row contingent a man had to be dragged out with his legs trailing limply behind him.

"Darro," Rowland mumbled with some severity, "he's started early. Disgrace! Gives the 'scursionists a bad name."

"Hi!" Dicky Corner House tried to hail a vanishing porter, "where's the nearest public-house in London?"

"Pubs in London opened already, then?" asked Shoni Matt in wonder and respect, gazing at 4.30 on the station clock.

"Don't be daft, man," Ivor snarled, surly from lack of sleep. "We got about seven hours to wait on our behinds."

A pitchy black shrouded the great station. Many braved the strange dark and wandered out into it. But in warily peering groups. A watery dawn found their numbers increased in the main thoroughfares; early workers saw them reconnoitering like invaders sniffing out a strange land.

"Well, well," said Rowland at ten o'clock, following his nose up the length of Nelson's column, "how did they get that man up there? And what for?"

"A fancy kind of chimney-stack it is," Dicky declared. "A big bakehouse is under us." He asked yet another policeman—the fourth—what time the public-houses opened, but the answer was the same.

"Now, Dicky," said Rowland, in a severe canting voice like a

preacher, "you go on behaving like that and very sorry I'll be that I rescued you that time. . . . We have come here," he added austerely, "to see the International, not to drink. Plenty of beer in Wales."

"I'm cold," bleated Shoni Matt; "I'm hungry; I'm sleepy."

"Let's go in there!" said Gwyn Short Leg, and they all entered the National Gallery, seeing that Admission was Free.

It was the Velasquez 'Venus' that arrested their full attention. "The artist," observed Emlyn Chrysanthemums—he was called that because he was a prize-grower of them in a home-made glasshouse—"was clever to make her turn her back on us. A bloke that knew what was tidy."

"Still," said Rowland, "he ought to have thrown a towel or something across her, just by here——"

"Looking so alive it is," Ivor breathed in admiration, "you could smack it, just there——"

An attendant said: "Do not touch the paintings."

"What's the time?" Dicky Corner House asked the attendant. "Are the pubs open yet?"

"A disgrace he is," said Rowland sharply as the contingent went out. "He ought to have stayed home."

By then the streets were still more crowded with gazing strangers. Scotland had sent tam-o'-shantered men, the North and Midlands their crowds of tall and short men in caps, bowlers, with umbrellas and striped scarves, concertinas and whistles. There were ghostly-looking men who looked as if they had just risen from hospital beds; others were unshaven and still bore the aspect of running late for the train. Many women accompanied the English contingents, for the Englishman never escapes this. By noon the invaders seemed to have taken possession of the metropolis and, scenting their powerful majority, they became noisy and obstreperous, unlike the first furtive groups which had arrived before dawn. And for a short while a million beer-taps flowed ceaselessly. But few of the visitors loitered to drink overmuch before the match. The evening was to come, when one could sit back released from the tremendous event.

At two-thirty, into a grey misty field surrounded by huge walls of buzzing insects stickily massed together, fifteen red beetles and fifteen white beetles ambled forward on springy legs. To a great cry the sacred egg appeared. A whistle blew. The beetles wove

a sharp pattern of movement, pursuing the egg with swift bounds and trim dance evolutions. Sometimes they became knotted over it as though in prayer. They worshipped the egg and yet they did not want it: as if it contained the secret of happiness, they pursued it, got it, and then threw it away. The sticky imprisoning walls heaved and roared; myriads of pin-point faces passed through agonies of horror and ecstasies of bliss. And from a great quantity of these faces came frenzied cries and urgings in a strange primitive language that no doubt gave added strength to the fifteen beetles who understood that language. It was not only the thirty below the walls who fought the battle.

The big clock's pallid face, which said it was a quarter to midnight, stared over the station like an amazed moon. Directly under it was a group of women who had arranged to meet their men there for the journey back. They looked worried and frightened.

And well they might. For surely they were standing in a gigantic hospital-base adjacent to a bloody battlefield where a crushing defeat had been sustained. On the platforms casualties lay groaning or silently dazed; benches were packed with huddled men, limbs twitching, heads laid on neighbours' shoulders or clasped in hands between knees. Trolleys were heaped with what looked like the dead. Now and again an ambulance train crawled out packed to the doors. But still more men kept staggering into the station from the maw of an underground cavern and from the black foggy streets. Most of them looked exhausted, if not positively wounded, as from tremendous strife.

But not all of them. Despite groans of the incapacitated, grunting heaves of the sick, long solemn stares of the bemused helplessly waiting for some ministering angel to conduct them to a train, there was a singing. Valiant groups of men put their heads doggedly together and burst into heroic song. They belonged to a race that, whatever the cause, never ceases to sing, and those competent to judge declare this singing something to be greatly admired. Tonight, in this melancholy place at the low hour of midnight, these melodious cries made the spirit of man seem undefeated. Stricken figures on floors, benches and trolleys stirred a little, and far-gone faces flickered into momentary awareness. Others who still retained their faculties sufficiently to

recognise home acquaintances shouted, embraced, hit each other, made excited turkey-cock enquiries as to the activities of the evening.

A youngish woman with parcels picked a zigzag way to under the clock and greeted another there. "Seen my Glynne, have you?" she asked anxiously; "I've been out to Cricklewood to visit my auntie. . . . Who won the match?" she asked, glancing about her in fear.

"You can tell by the state of them, can't you!" frowned the other.

Another woman, with a heave of hostility, said: "Though even if Wales had lost they'd drink just the same, to drown the disappointment, the old beasts. . . . Look out!" The women scattered hastily from a figure who became detached from a knot of swaying men, made a blind plunge in their direction, and was sick.

"Where's the porters?" wailed one woman. "There's no porters to be seen anywhere; they've all run home. . . . Serve us right we shouldn't have come with the men's 'scursion. . . . I'm feeling ill, nowhere to sit, only men everywhere."

Cap pushed back from his blue-marked miner's face, Matt Griffiths of Gelli bellowed a way up No. 1 platform. He was gallantly pulling a trolley heaped with bodies like immense dead cods. "Where's the backwards 'scursion train for Gelli?" he shouted. "Out of the way there! We got to go on the night-shift tomorrow."

"The wonder is," said a woman, fretful, "that they can find their way to the station at all. But there, they're like dogs pointing their snouts towards home."

Two theological students, solemn-clothed as crows, passed under the clock. They were in fierce converse and gesticulated dangerously with their flappy umbrellas. Yet they seemed oblivious of the carnal scenes around them; no doubt they were occupied with some knotty biblical matter. The huddled women looked at them with relief; here was safety. "We'd better get in the same compartment as them," one of them said to her friend; "come on, Gwen, let's follow them. I expect they've been up for a conference or an exam." Soon the two young preachers-to-be were being followed by quite a band of women though they remained unconscious of this flattering retinue.

"That reverse pass of Williams!" one of the students suddenly

burst out, unable to contain himself, and prancing forward in intoxicated delight. "All the matches I've been to I've never seen anything like it! Makes you want to grab someone and dance ring-a-ring-o'roses."

Elsewhere, an entwined group of young men sang *Mochyn Du* with an orderly sweetness in striking contrast to their mien; a flavour of pure green hills and neat little farmhouses was in their song about a black pig. On adjacent platforms other groups in that victorious concourse sang *Sospan Fach* and even a hymn. As someone said, if you shut your eyes you could fancy yourself in an eisteddfod.

But in the Gentlemen's Convenience under No. 1 platform no one would have fancied this. There an unusual thing had occurred—the drains had clogged. Men kept on descending the flight of steps only to find a sheet of water flooding the floor to a depth of several inches. They had to make-do with standing on the bottom steps, behind them an impatient block of others dangerously swaying.

And this was not all. Far within the deserted convenience one man was marooned over that sheet of water. He sat on the shoeshine throne which, resting on its dais, was raised safely—up to the present—above the water. With head lolling on his shoulder he sat fast asleep, at peace, comfortable in the full-sized armchair. Astonished remarks from the steps failed to reach him.

"Darro me," exclaimed one man with a stare of respect across the waters, "how did he get there? No sign of a boat."

"Hoy," another bawled over, "what train you want to catch? You can't stay there all night."

"Who does he think he is," someone else exclaimed in an English voice—"King Canute?"

The figure did not hear, though the head dreamily lolled forward an inch. Impatient men waiting on the crowded steps bawled to those in front to hurry up and make room. Soon the rumour that King Canute was sitting below passed among a lot of people on No. 1 platform. It was not long before someone—Sam Recitations it was, the Smoking Concert Elocutionist—arrived at the bottom step and recognised that the figure enthroned above the water was not King Canute at all.

"I'm hanged if it isn't Rowland from Pleasant Row!" he blew

in astonishment. "That's where he's got! . . . Rowland," his chest rose as in a recitation, "wake up, man, wake up! Train is due out in ten minutes. Number 2 platform. . . ."

Rowland did not hear even this well-known Twlldu voice. Sam, himself not in full possession of his faculties, gazed stupidly at the sheet of water. It looked deep; up to your calves. A chap would have soaking wet socks and shoes all the way back to Wales. And he was appearing at a club concert on Tuesday, reciting four ballads; couldn't afford to catch a cold. Suddenly he pushed his way through the exclaiming mob behind him, hastened recklessly through the platform mobs, reached No. 2 platform and began searching for the Pleasant Row contingent.

They were sitting against a kiosk plunged in torpid thought. Sam had to shake two or three of them. "I've seen him!" he rolled. "Your Rowland! He isn't lost—he's down in the men's place under Number 1, and can't budge him. People calling him King Canute [illegible]"

They had lost him round about nine o'clock in crowded Trafalgar Square. There the visiting mob had got so obstreperous that, as someone related later at a club in Twlldu, four roaring lions had been let loose and stood lashing their tails in fury against these invaders whose nation had won the match; and someone else said that for the first time in his life he had seen a policeman who wore spectacles. While singing was going on, and two or three cases of assault brewing, Rowland had vanished. From time to time the others had missed him, and Dicky Corner House asked many policemen if they had seen Rowland of Twlldu.

Sam Recitations kept on urging them now. "King Canute?" repeated Shoni Matt in a stupor. "You shut up, Sam," he added crossly; "no time for recitations now."

"He's down in the Gents under Number 1," Sam howled despairingly. "English strangers poking fun at him and water rising up! He'll be drowned same as when the Cambrian pit was flooded!" He beat his chest as if he was giving a ballad in a concert. "Ten minutes and the train will be in! And poor Rowland sitting helpless and the water rising round him like on the sands of Dee!"

Far off a whistle blew. Someone near-by was singing *Cwm Rhondda* in a bass that must have won medals in its time. They shook themselves up from the platform, staring penetratingly at

Sam, who was repeating information with wild emphasis. Six of them, all from Pleasant Row. Awareness seemed to flood them simultaneously, for suddenly they all surged away.

By dint of pushing and threatening cries they got down all together to the lower steps of the Convenience. Rowland had not moved in the shoe-shine throne. Still his head lolled in slumber as if he was sitting cosy by his fireside at home after a heavy shift in the pit, while the waters lapped the dais and a yellow light beat down on the isolated figure indifferent to its danger. They stared fearfully at the sheet of water.

"Shocking it is," said Gwyn Short Leg, scandalised. "All the Railway Company gone home, have they, and left the place like this?"

"In London too!" criticised Ivor, gazing below him in owlish distaste.

Then in one accord they bellowed: "Hoy, Rowland, hoy!"

He did not stir. Not an eyelid. It was then that Shoni Matt turned to Dicky Corner House and just looked at him, like a judge. His gaze asked—"Whose life had been saved by Rowland when that bit of roof had fallen in the pit?" Dicky, though he shivered, understood the long solemn look. "Time to pay back now, Dicky," the look added soberly.

Whimpering, Dicky tried to reach his shoe-laces, on the crowded steps. But the others urged excitedly: "No time to take your shoes off. Hark, the train's coming in! Go on, boy. No swimming to do."

Dicky, with a sudden dramatic cry, leapt into the water, foolishly splashing it up all round his legs. A pit-butty needed to be rescued! And with oblivious steps, encouraged by the applause of the others, he plunged across to the throne. He stepped on the dais and, being hefty, lifted Rowland across his shoulders without much bother. He staggered a bit as he stepped off the dais into the cruelly wet water.

"Careful now," shouted Emlyn Chrysanthemums; "don't drop him into the champagne."

It was an heroic act that afterwards, in the club evenings, took precedence over tales of far more difficult rescues in the pits. Dicky reached the willing arms of the others without mishap. They took Rowland and bore him by his four limbs up the steps, down the platform and up the other, just as the incoming train

was coming to a frightened standstill. After a battle they got into a compartment. Dicky took off his shoes, hung up his socks over the edge of the rack and wiped his feet and calves in the white muffler that had crossed his throat.

"Wet feet bad for the chest," he said fussily.

All the returning trains reached the arms of Wales safely, and she folded the passengers into her fragrant breast with a pleased sigh of "Well done, my sons". The victory over her ancient enemy—it was six points to four—was a matter of great Sunday celebration when the men's clubs opened in the evening, these having a seven-day licence, whereas the ordinary public-houses, owing to the need to appease old dim gods, were not allowed to open on Sundays.

The members of the Pleasant Row contingent, like most others, stayed in bed all the morning. When they got up they related to their wives and children many of the sights and marvels of London. But some weeks had passed before Rowland's wife, a tidy woman who starched her aprons and was a great chapel-goer, said to him in perplexity: "Why is it people are calling you Rowland Canute now?"

Only that evening, Gwyn Short Leg, stumping to the door on his way to the club, had bawled innocently into the passage: "Coming down, Rowland Canute?" Up to lately Rowland had been one of those who, because he seemed to have no peculiarity, had never earned a nickname.

"Oh," Rowland told his wife, vaguely offhand, "some fancy name or other it is they've begun calling me."

"But a reason there must be for it," she said inquisitively. "Canute! Wasn't that some old king who sat on his throne beside the sea and dared the tide to come over him? A funny name to call you."

"What you got in the oven for my supper?" he asked, scowling at the news in the evening paper.

She knew better than to proceed with the matter just then. But of course she did not let it rest. It was the wife of Emlyn Chrysanthemums, living three doors up, who, in the deprecating way of women versus the ways of men, told her the reason. There are nicknames which are earned respectably and naturally, and indeed such nicknames are essential to identify persons in a

land where there are only twenty or so proper baptised names for everybody. But, on hearing how Rowland earned Canute, his wife pursed in her lips like a pale tulip, opening them hours later to shout as Rowland tramped in from the pit:

"Ah, *Canute* is it! . . . Sitting there in that London place," she screamed, "and all those men——" She whipped about like a hailstorm. "You think I'm going to stay in Twlldu to be called Mrs. Rowland Canute, do you? We'll have to move from here—you begin looking for work in one of the other valleys at once."

And such a dance she led him that in a couple of months they had left Pleasant Row. Rowland got taken on at the Powell pit in the Cwm Mardy valley, several stout mountains lying between that and Twlldu.

Yet give a dog a bad name, says the proverb, and it will stick. Who would have thought that Sam Recitations, growing in fame, would visit a club in far-away Cwm Mardy to give selections from his repertoire at a Smoking Concert? And almost the first man he saw when he entered the bar-room was Rowland. "Why now," his voice rolled in delight, "if it isn't Rowland Canute! Ha, ha——" And not noticing Rowland's dropped jaw of dismay, he turned and told all the clustering men what had happened under Paddington platform that time after the famous International—just as the history of the rescue had been told in all the clubs in the valley away over the mountains.

Fear

As soon as the boy got into the compartment he felt there was something queer in it. The only other occupant was a slight, dusky man who sat in a corner with that air of propriety and unassertiveness which his race—he looked like an Indian—tend to display in England. There was also a faint sickly scent. For years afterwards, whenever he smelled that musk odour again, the terror of this afternoon came back to him.

He went to the other end of the compartment, sat in the opposite corner. There were no corridors in these local trains.

The man looked at him and smiled friendlily. The boy returned the smile briefly, not quite knowing what he was thinking, only aware of a deep, vague unease. But it would look so silly to jump out of the compartment now. The train gave a jerk and began to move.

Then, immediately with the jerk, the man began to utter a low humming chant, slow but with a definite rhythm. His lips did not open or even move, yet the hum penetrated above the noise of the train's wheels. It was in a sort of dreamy rhythm, enticing, lonely and antique; it suggested monotonous deserts, an eternal patience, a soothing wisdom. It went on and on. It was the kind of archaic chant that brings to the mind images of slowly swaying bodies in some endless ceremony in a barbaric temple.

Startled, and very alive to this proof of there being something odd in the compartment, the boy turned from staring out of the window—already the train was deep in the country among lonely fields and dark wooded slopes—and forced himself to glance at the man.

The man was looking at him. They faced each other across the compartment's length. Something coiled up in the boy. It was as if his soul took primitive fear and crouched to hide. The man's brown lips became stretched in a mysterious smile, though that humming chant continued, wordlessly swaying out of his mouth. His eyes, dark and unfathomable, never moved from the boy. The musk scent was stronger.

Yet this was not all. The boy could not imagine what other fearful thing lurked in the compartment. But he seemed to sense a secret power of something evilly antipathetic. Did it come from the man's long pinky-brown hands, the sinewy but fleshless hands of a sun-scorched race? Long tribal hands like claws. Or only from the fact that the man was of a far country whose ways were utterly alien to ours? And he continued to smile. A faint and subtle smile, while his eyes surveyed the boy as if he contemplated action. Something had flickered in and out of those shadowy eyes, like a dancing malice.

The boy sat stiffly. Somehow he could not return to his staring out of the window. But he tried not to look at the man again. The humming did not stop. And suddenly it took a higher note, like an unhurried wail, yet keeping within its strict and narrow compass. A liquid exultance wavered in and out of

the wail. The noise of the train, the flying fields and woods, even the walls of the compartment, had vanished. There was only this chant, the man who was uttering it, and himself. He did not know that now he could not move his eyes from those of the man.

Abruptly the compartment was plunged into blackness. There was a shrieking rush of air. The train had entered a tunnel. With a sudden jerk the boy crouched down. He coiled into the seat's corner, shuddering, yet with every sense electrically alive now.

Then, above the roar of the air and the hurling grind of the train, that hum rose, dominantly establishing its insidious power. It called, it unhurriedly exhorted obedience, it soothed. Again it seemed to obliterate the louder, harsher noises. Spent and defeated, helplessly awaiting whatever menace lay in the darkness, the boy crouched. He knew the man's eyes were gazing towards him; he thought he saw their gleam triumphantly piercing the darkness. What was this strange presence of evil in the air, stronger now in the dark?

Suddenly crashing into the compartment, the hard blue and white daylight was like a blow. The train had gained speed in the tunnel and now hurled on through the light with the same agonising impetus, as if it would rush on for ever. Spent in the dread which had almost cancelled out his senses, the boy stared dully at the man. Still he seemed to hear the humming, though actually it had ceased. He saw the man's lips part in a full enticing smile, he saw teeth dazzlingly white between the dusky lips.

"You not like dark tunnel?" The smile continued seductively; once more the flecks of light danced wickedly in his eyes. "Come!" He beckoned with a long wrinkled finger.

The boy did not move.

"You like pomegranates?" He rose and took from the luggage-rack a brown wicker basket. It was the kind of basket in which a large cat would be sent on a journey. "Come!" he smiled friendlily and, as the boy still did not move, he crossed over and sat down beside him, but leaving a polite distance.

The staring boy did not flinch.

"Pomegranates from the East! English boy like, eh?" There seemed a collaboration in his intimate voice; he too was a boy going to share fruit with his friend. "Nice pomegranates," he smiled with good-humour. There was also something stupid in his manner, a fatuous mysteriousness.

The basket lay on his knees. He began to hum again. The boy watched, still without movement, cold and abstract in his non-apprehension of this friendliness. But he was aware of the sickly perfume beside him and, more pronounced than ever, of an insidious presence that was utterly alien. That evil power lay in his immediate vicinity. The man looked at him again and, still humming, drew a rod and lifted the basket's lid.

There was no glow of magically gleaming fruits, no yellow-and-rose-tinted rinds enclosing honeycombs of luscious seeds. But from the basket's depth rose the head of a snake. It rose slowly to the enchantment of the hum. It rose from its sleepy coil, rearing its long brownish-gold throat dreamily, the head swaying out in languor towards the man's lips. Its eyes seemed to look blindly at nothing. It was a cobra.

Something happened to the boy. An old warning of the muscles and the vulnerable flesh. He leapt and flung himself headlong across the compartment. He was not aware that he gave a sharp shriek He curled against the opposite seat's back, his knees pressing into the cushion. But, half turning, his eyes could not tear themselves from that reared head.

And it was with other senses that he knew most deeply he had evoked rage. The cobra was writhing in disturbed anger, shooting its head in his direction. He saw wakened pin-point eyes of black malice. More fearful was the dilation of the throat, its skin swelling evilly into a hood in which shone two palpitating sparks. In some cell of his being he knew that the hood was swelling in destructive fury. He became very still.

The man did not stop humming. But now his narrowed eyes were focused in glittering concentration on the snake. And into that hum had crept a new note of tenacious decision. It was a pitting of subtle power against the snake's wishes and it was also an appeasement. A man was addressing a snake. He was offering a snake tribute and acknowledgment of its right to anger; he was honeyed and soothing. At the same time he did not relax an announcement of being master. There was courtesy towards one of the supreme powers of the animal kingdom, but also there was the ancient pride of man's supremacy.

And the snake was pacified. Its strange reared collar of skin sank back into its neck; its head ceased to lunge towards the boy. The humming slackened into a dreamy lullaby. Narrowly intent

now, the man's eyes did not move. The length of tawny body slowly sank back. Its skin had a dull glisten, the glisten of an unhealthy torpidity. Now the snake looked effete, shorn of its venomous power. The drugged head sank. Unhurriedly, the man closed the basket and slipped its rod secure.

He turned angrily to the boy; he made a contemptuous sound, like a hiss. "I show you cobra and you jump and shout, heh! Make him angry!" There was more rebuke than real rage in his exclamations. But also his brown face was puckered in a kind of childish stupidity; he might have been another boy of twelve. "I give you free performance with cobra, and you jump and scream like little girl." The indignation died out of his eyes; they became focused in a more adult perception. "I sing to keep cobra quiet in train," he explained. "Cobra not like train."

The boy had not stirred. "You not like cobra?" the man asked in injured surprise. "Nice snake now, no poison! But not liking you jump and shout."

There was no reply or movement; centuries and continents lay between him and the boy's still repudiation. The man gazed at him in silence and added worriedly: "You going to fair in Newport? You see me? Ali the Snake Charmer. You come in free and see me make cobra dance——

But the train was drawing into the station. It was not the boy's station. He made a sudden blind leap away from the man, opened the door, saw it was not on the platform side, but jumped. There was a shout from someone. He ran up the track, he dived under some wire railings. He ran with amazingly quick short leaps up a field—like a hare that knows its life is precarious among the colossal dangers of the open world and has suddenly sensed one of them.

The Benefit Concert

WHEN IT WAS DECIDED TO GIVE A BENEFIT CONCERT FOR JENKIN, so that he could buy an artificial leg, no one thought this ordinary event would lead to such strife. But then no one suspected that the loss of his proper leg—it had gone gangrenous through



neglect—had turned Jenkin into a megalomaniac. The affair not only divided the valley into bitterly opposed camps but it nearly caused a strike in the colliery. Imperfect mankind is addicted to warfare and a false leg is as good a pretext for liberating smouldering passions as greed for a continent.

To begin with, the colliery where Jenkin worked was not obliged to give him compensation. He had neglected a wound received in the pit, refusing medical attention, and it was not until some weeks had passed that the leg showed signs of protest. His blood was in bad condition (as the camp later opposed to his side repeated in another sense) and the leg had always been a twitchy one. Though he could have fought his case in the courts, this wasn't done, Jenkin having a horror of courts ever since that time he was accused—unfairly, though none the less he lost his case—of buying a concertina knowing it had been stolen. Well, now he had lost his leg, too, and not a penny in the bank.

He was still convalescent in the hospital when his butties in No. 2 pit decided to give him a benefit. A committee was formed and the valley's Male Voice Choir, ever ready to open their melodious jaws, consented to give a selection from their repertoire including their famous 'Italian Salad'. This in itself would bring in sufficient money to cover the cost of a leg and the committee decided that two shillings was enough for top-price tickets. They approached the deacons of Horeb chapel for use of this big building; Jenkin, off and on, had been a member of Horeb, though he never had more than one leg—and that the twitchy one—in religion. The deacons, not liking their chapel to be taken out of their hands by a lot of more or less outsiders, said they would organise the concert themselves. The rough-and-ready committee readily agreed to this, glad to be rid of the work, and the deacons of Horeb then went into owlish conclave.

"Well, Jenkin"—one of his butties sat by the hospital bed—"a present the boys will have ready for you after you come out. Tell that nurse by there to measure you and place the order for it at once."

Jenkin showed one cunning eye from the bedclothes, for he liked his head covered in this draughty hospital. "What's that, mun? Coffin is it to be, or a pair of home-made crutches?"

"Wind of it you've got already, I can see, Jenkin. Best-quality

artificial leg you're going to have, the same as Samson the Fireman's got." Samson, before wearing it, had proudly exhibited his leg for a week in his front parlour window, so that all passers-by could see the marvel with its silver joints, leather flesh, and delicate screws.

"But what I'm going to do for work I don't know," Jenkin grunted, however. "A 'bacco shop I'd like to open."

"The pit's sure to give you a job on top; in the lamp-room p'raps. Don't you worry now. You get well for the concert. On the platform you'll have to sit, and if the leg comes in time it can stand on a table to show everybody."

Jenkin got better quickly after this and was out of the hospital long before the night of the concert. The leg had been ordered, but the date of delivery was unknown. But what did become known was that the deacons of Horeb had taken full advantage of this excuse for a concert and done things on a grand scale. They had solicited the charity of four vocalists, and of these four they had persuaded—great triumph—Madame Sarah Watkins to come out of her retirement and shed her lustre, gratis, on the event.

As soon as it became known that she was to appear all tickets were sold, and as top price for these was five shillings (for the deacons were business men), a sum would be raised far beyond the leg's cost. Sarah Watkins's voice was legendary and a tale told by firesides. Still more enticing, her life had been scandalous, though of course her voice covered a multitude of sins. Wife to four men (at different times), a heavy drinker (of whisky), a constant attendant at courts (for debt), notorious for tantrums (in her heyday, that is), a wearer of flashy clothes (all belonging to the era of plush pineapples and whole cygnets on hats), she was an explosion of female vitality to be reckoned with. Though now in her retirement she lived on the coast twenty miles away, Madame Watkins was a native of the valley, where her father had been one of the pioneering miners. And she had always declared, with a heave of her bosom, that she loved dear little Twlldu. Proof of this was now evident. She hadn't sung in public for fifteen years.

"Your leg it is, mun," people said to Jenkin. "Your leg it is that has given her a push out again."

What the Jenkin crowd did not know was that it was the honeyed flattery, religious blandishments, and oratorical fervour

of one of the Horeb deacons that had worked a spell on Sarah; he had called on her, claiming an acquaintance with her dead father. She didn't care a rap for Jenkin's leg. But, aged now, she had begun to turn an occasional eye to the religious things of her childhood; it was as well to be on the safe side. Yes, she would sing in a chapel, and not for money but for glory; and she had offered the deacon a whisky, which he at once declined.

Her name on the posters, with *London*, *Milan*, and *Twlldu* printed under it, created a sensation. The other three soloists were of local origin, too, though of course they were not to be compared. But, what with the choir as well, a huge success was assured. The deacons of Horeb informed the hospital that the bill for Mr. Jenkin Morgans's leg was to be sent to them and same would be paid cash down. It was then that Jenkin began to wake up.

"How much the leg?" he mildly asked the hospital, going up there on crutches, and a sister who had taken a fancy to him promised to find out. "Like to know, I do, how much money I am costing," he explained, "so that I can give thanks according."

The day before the concert he called on one of the deacons in his home. "Sit down here there," said the deacon kindly, taking the crutches. "Arrived has the leg in the hospital, then! Fixing it on you they'll be soon, no doubt."

"Aye"—Jenkin blew straight, full of high stomach already because of all the talk about him—"but what I am wanting to know, Mr. Price-Harris, is *what about the extra money?*"

"Come now," purred Mr. Price-Harris, "your leg you've got."

"My benefit this concert is," said Jenkin ominously. "The talk is that more than a hundred pounds is left over."

The deacon pronounced, stern at once: "Work has been done by the deacons of Horeb, and Madame Sarah Watkins is singing out of love for the old chapel of her dead father. On the glory of Horeb the extra money will be spent. Dilapidations there are and a new coat of paint needed, and——"

Jenkin heaved himself up and took his crutches. "Good day to you now," he said meekly.

Half an hour before the concert's starting time the chapel was packed with women in all their beads, brooches, and furs, the men in Sunday dark and starch. A wooden platform had been erected under the pulpit; a piano, chairs, and a table stood on it.

In the gallery around the pipe organ behind the pulpit the Male Voice Choir assembled in good time. But no one needed to hurry. Madame Watkins wasn't nearly ready. A turmoil was going on in the vestry behind. The diva, like an old war-horse taken out again too near the smell and roar of cannon, was behaving as in her heyday. The deacons were flustered. They couldn't be expected to know that such as Madame Watkins never got the inspiration to sing before they had torn a lion or two into pieces.

The car that had been hired to fetch her was an old decrepit one driven by the fishmonger's lout of a son. And he had taken it into his head to kill two birds on this trip by collecting a small cask of herrings from the coast; it was already beside him on the front seat when he called for Madame Watkins, who brought with her a large suitcase. Secondly, no one had remembered to welcome her arrival with flowers. Thirdly, no one had thought she would need, for changing into a concert dress, somewhere more private than a vestry filled with coming and going persons connected with tonight's affair. The other three soloists, neatly attired but of whom she had never heard, waited open-mouthed.

"Get me screens, then," she bellowed, "and a full-length mirror, and a dresser. . . Ach," her body gave a great quake, "I stink of fish. . . Violet scent too," she screamed after people who were running out into the street in search of screens and mirrors. A deacon's wife went into the chapel to scan the tiers of people for someone known to be a dressmaker. Everything was procured in due time, though the mirror was only one taken down from someone's parlour wall. The concert began an hour late.

Yet no one would have guessed the diva's fury when at last she mounted the platform and, amid thunderous applause, gave a superb bow. She advanced like an old ruined queen majestically unaware of new fashions and systems, giving an expert kick to the billowing train of her dragon-coloured but tattered dress. At sight of her, and perhaps the train, a little hiss of awe seemed to come from the goggling women in the audience. The smile issuing from the clumps of fat, the ravines, and scarlet meadows of that face, was sweeter than Lucrezia Borgia's. An aigrette feather leaped from her auburn wig. There was a smell; a fierce perfume could be smelled even all round the gallery. It was as if Madame Watkins, a member of some mythical race, had risen through the parted earth amid the odours of flowers more gloriously ornate

than were known above. The slim pianist seemed to wilt over the keys as he waited. Above, the Male Voice Choir, which had already sung an opening chorus, slunk back in abeyance.

"Fancy," a woman upstairs reminded her companion of the diva's last appearance, "any council summonsing her for rates!"

"Oh, there's beautiful she is!" whispered the other in an aghast voice. "And there's glad I am I've seen her. A pity for him, but if it wasn't for Jenkin's leg——"

But the erstwhile diva was launching into something out of *Carmen*. And soon it became plain that she had already given her performance. In her voice were gaping cracks through which wheezed a ghostly wind. No matter, no matter at all! For they were cracks in a temple of glorious style. A ruined temple far away in the mists of a lonely hilltop, but grander than anything of today.

Everyone felt sorry for the vocalist who followed Madame Watkins; she was still of coltish age, in full possession of her voice, very popular on the radio, and spick-and-span to look at as a new button. Madame Watkins refused to give an encore, but she was down to sing 'Home, Sweet Home,' in the second half. Her exit had even more pomp than her entrance, and the applause (it was said afterwards) brought a rush of soot down the chimney of the house next door up Horeb.

Intermission said the programme, and everyone knew what that meant. Jenkin was going to go on the platform and give tidy public thanks for his artificial leg. Ah, there he was, clumping up on his crutches and followed by a pit butty who carried the leg. Sympathetic applause greeted him. The butty stood shyly holding the limb upright on the table. Those who had missed seeing Fireman Samson's leg in his window now had their opportunity. Necks were craned and approval seemed plain in the air. It was not known then that Jenkin's crutches and his thickset butty had forced their way to the platform through a wall of hostile deacons.

"No public speaker I am," began Jenkin in a mild kind of way, "and not yet properly back from my serious operation under chloroform. But things must be said. The leg by there is come and very thankful I am for it—and will be more after it is fitted on and got used to my ways." He ran a cunningly assessing eye round all the chapel and curbed the aggressive note that had crept into his voice. "But a dispute has arose, sorry to say. For my benefit this

concert was made, as my butties in No. 2 pit can prove, and over a hundred pounds is lying in the chapel safe after the leg is paid for. A little 'bacco shop I want to open, and the hundred pounds just right! But no—the respected deacons of Horeb say, '*No.*' For paint and varnish on Horeb they want the money. Well, permission I am asking to say just now that it is not right!" He nodded his head ominously and finished: "No more now, then, thanking you one and all, and Mrs. Watkins, too, that don't know." And nodding to the butty, who took the leg under his arm, he began to clump off the platform.

An awkward silence followed him. As far as could be judged, there were those who felt that a concert in a chapel was no place to make such a complaint. But also there were those who, ever ready to suspect ill-conduct in high places, followed Jenkin's exit with an approving eye. Then up to the platform walked dignified Mr. J. T. Llewellyn, a deacon of long and admired standing. Sternly he said in the quiet:

"Respecting the matter mentioned just now by Mr. Jenkin Morgans, the benefit that was asked by his friends of the pit is now fulfilled. A leg first-class is given to him. Success of this concert was business of Horeb's deacons and much interest in the needs of the chapel showed Madame Sarah Watkins when she remembered it was the chapel of her old father. . . . Now," he continued with an austere dismissal and looking at a copy of the programme, "back to the concert! The choir will open again with a rendering of 'Italian Salad'. Ladies and gentlemen, 'Italian Salad'!" And with this flourish he swept away.

While Madame Watkins in the vestry—the screens around her —was taking a secret drink of whisky out of a medicine bottle, Mr. J. T. Llewellyn thought it prudent to break into her privacy to mention the leg affair. Infuriated by (a) being caught red-handed drinking an intoxicant in a chapel vestry and (b) the deacon's tale of Jenkin's exhibition on the platform, the diva began to boil again. What, a surgical leg had been displayed on the platform a few minutes after her appearance! Her sense of style and what was fitting in a concert containing her was outraged. Amateurs, she taunted, bah! The deacon, flustered by this unaccustomed kind of high-mindedness, continued to mumble explanations uselessly. "Interested in surgical legs I am *not*!" she stormed. "Ring up that curtain, and let me get home."

"No curtain there is here." The deacon coughed. "But a hot supper is waiting for you after the concert, along with the other soloists."

"What! Who are these persons?" she blew. "Do they sell cockles and mussels in the daytime?"

And she all but ran out to sing 'Home, Sweet Home'. Yet once more the smile that greeted the loving applause was of a piercing and all-embracing sweetness which made few shiver. And the cracked voice gave an added poignancy to the old song. Not many eyes remained quite dry, for was not the celebrated Madame Watkins singing this song in her true birthplace? The concert was considered, and rightly, a red-letter one.

But the matter of Jenkin's leg did not remain there. Many of the men in No. 2 pit took umbrage at the chapel's treatment of their one-time fellow workman. These, in any case, were always critical of chapels and their power over social pleasures. Fierce arguments developed in the pits, and the ancient question of whether there is an Almighty or not was yet again raised by the opposed forces. Continued in public places on top, the dispute caused some physical combats on Saturday nights. The men's families began to take sides, too, and many were the hostilities exchanged over back-garden fences by wives pegging out washing; many were the schoolyard tumbles. After three weeks of this a meeting of miners was called in the Workmen's Hall. A strong faction of the men wanted to go on strike if Jenkin did not receive all profits from the concert.

The deacons of Horeb put on their armour. Some of them were officials in the colliery; others hoped to be. They gave emphatic "No" to this new blackmail by men whose infamy was worsened by their being of atheistic mind. They sat tight. Out in the valley a complication was added to the affair by Jenkin's decision not to use the artificial leg till his plea had been settled. He went about the place on his pathetic crutches, thus keeping quick his supporters' sympathy.

"No," he would say, brave, "all right I am. But set fire to me would that leg if I put it on. Just going down to the barber's I am to read the papers." Too poor he was to buy papers, of course.

Well, the Miners' Federation, getting wind of this unofficial

strike, forbade it. Jenkin's supporters became more haughty at this. Hadn't the men of Twlldu downed tools once because an unpopular policeman was carrying on with a married woman? Wasn't this robbery of Jenkin worse? Glittering words were used at a second Workmen's Hall meeting. Finally it was decided to give the deacons another fortnight to hand over the money. There had been no signs of painters and plasterers starting work on the chapel.

"No," said Bryn Stop Tap, an extremist, "nor won't be. But fur coats will be seen on the deacons' wives and the ginger-beer van calling every day at their houses."

Jenkin whimpered with devilish meekness: "Stop the old fuss. Bad blood I am spreading." But still he wouldn't use the leg, and his crutches and folded-up trouser were a standing reproach to everybody.

There was a nasty row in the fruit shop one Friday evening. Mrs. Evans Fruit, a suspected supporter of the deacons' side, was accused by a pro-Jenkin woman of giving her nothing but damaged apples while only healthy ones had just gone into the basket of a customer also suspected to be on the other side. The shop was full of women.

"You get out of my shop, you liar!" shouted Mrs. Evans.

Pointing at the fruiterer, another customer said two words: "She's Horeb!"

As is known from the conduct of mobs in the French Revolution, a single accusing cry can batter down a palace and spread riot like a tornado. Soon the shop was in a very untidy state and several old insulting scandals had been referred to in the course of the row. Mrs. Evans herself collapsed on to a basket of greengages, but by the time the policeman arrived order had been restored and everybody felt twice alive and that the world was worth living in after all. Jenkin heard, of course, of this battle on his behalf and once more called on the local reporter, trying to incite him to inform his paper. Meanwhile, he had also laboured over a long letter to Madame Sarah Watkins, soliciting her opinion. But he received no reply.

"Oh, don't you bother about me," he whined in the Bracchi ice-cream and coffee shop a week later, as everybody offered him a seat. "Lean on my crutches I can. Only come in to pass the time I have. If I had my little 'bacco shop, busy enough I would be."

But it was strange that no one offered him a cigarette that day, or refreshment.

A third Workmen's Hall meeting was held long after the fortnight had gone. The deacons had made no sign. But neither were the painters and ladders about Horeb. At the meeting there was a lot of high talk and everybody had a consoling word for Jenkin; the feeling was that soon as a painter's brush was put to Horeb the bomb would burst. But it was strange that the meeting got on quite soon to New Year fixtures for the Twlldu Eleven. Jenkin sat with his head on one side like a long-suffering bird.

"Waiting for the spring the deacons are," someone told Jenkin outside the pub's closed door. "Horeb will have a spring cleaning on your money. Better ask for a job on top of the pits, Jenkin."

One January day Jenkin, giving vent to loud abuse, threw a crutch through a window of Horeb. But all that resulted was a summons and he had to pay the cost of the window. Feeling for and against him was revived for a day or two. Yet it was only talk and argument. Then at the end of February Mrs. Roberts the Washing's house went up in flames. A poor widow who took in washing, her cottage wasn't insured. Though she was out during the fire and didn't have to be rescued, a long sigh of sorrow for her went right through the valley. It was plain what would have to be done in her aid.

"Ask Madame Sarah Watkins to come again," several persons said. A committee was formed.

The day after the fire Jenkin's wife took out a long cardboard box from under the bed. She was a quiet little woman who rarely put a foot into the valley's doings. But she had good eyesight and ears clear of wax. Jenkin looked at her sulkily. "A bit tired I am," she said, "of idleness and sloth. Put on your leg, Jenkin, and go up to the pits for work." On the promise of the Horeb money coming she had been lent cash by her sister. "Come on, Jenkin," she coaxed. And she said cleverly: "Put not your trust in princes and the people of this earth."

Jenkin lifted his head. A religious light shone in his eyes. "Aye," he said in grand contempt, "the bull's-eye you said there! Shall a man like me be lowered because all around him are low? Help me with my leg, Maria. The hospital said like this——"

In March men placed ladders against Horeb and, carrying cans of primrose paint, they went up them unmolested. But the concert

for Mrs. Roberts the Washing's benefit was not held there. And Madame Sarah Watkins did not appear for this; she wrote saying that her retirement was final unless her health improved. But she was in the papers again before March was out: a firm of licensed victuallers sued her for goods delivered. She told the court that she had been too goodhearted and lately had sung everywhere for nothing, in aid of this and that charity. After the painters had done the windows of Horeb they varnished the solid pews inside.

The Contraption

I

THE ALMSHOUSES WERE OF OLD-BRUISED STONE, knowing two centuries' wear. They were sheltered among the elms like things forgotten of this world, with that air of idealistic peace one still comes upon occasionally in the country. Nine women of the district inhabited them, their characters having been thoroughly vouched for and poked into by a local committee presided over by the Rector. And tranquil the small grey houses had been for many a long year, until Mrs. Hope-Cary decided that improvements were needed.

Pushing out a dramatic face over the huge nigger teapot, old Sarah Crump declared ungratefully at supper one night:

"And who's she, then? Been in the village ten years—pah, five minutes. I for one don't want her contraption. What say you, girls?"

Ida Neate, eighty and always trembling like a brown leaf, wet her lips with a tongue narrow as a lily-pistil. "She step into my room and says: 'Winder never opened,' and when I says opened winder always gives me croup, she says: 'Nonsense, good 'ooman, the very reason why you has it.' " Ida tittered. "I lay she'll never live to be eighty, with her winders open and never knowing how to sit her body down and let it take a mike. She fusses about till you can see steam coming out of her trap."

"That was a wig she 'ad on," declared Susie Eighteen dourly.

With bated breath, Ena Tulk asked for details of the contraption

the lady was suggesting for installation. Frail as smoke, her hands fluttered over her eyes as she giggled modestly: "'Taint wanted here, surely!" she gasped. "The old way has done us all our lives and no harm's come of it."

The other women voiced their criticism too. Mrs. Hope-Cary was not liked. Sarah Crump, indignantly pouring herself another cup of strong tea, cried:

"If Committee's got all that brass to spend, we'd lief have it turned into what's good for our *insides.* What do what *she* says we ought to have matter? Ena's right. The old way's done our families since time was, and no harm's come of it. . . . Beer's thin and sloppy for dinner. The money ought to be spent on something with more body to it. And the penn'orth of boiled fruit-drops on Saturday!" She leaned over the teapot angrily. "Across in the houses at Milchester," she whispered dramatically, "they get *quarter-pound* of liquorice allsorts *or* black-currant gums, which you like."

The company made suitable exclamations of surprised envy. They wore black serge gowns and bibbed white aprons; a white frill clasped half their heads. None except Sarah Crump had much hair. And whether it was by virtue of her great twist of iron-grey hair, or her busy tongue, or the bright swing of her cherry-dark eyes, Sarah was acknowledged boss of the bunch. She it was who spoke up when the women were invited to do so by the visiting members of the Committee; she it was who had obtained tins of salmon for Sunday-night supper, instead of cold cod pie; she it was who obtained official permission for the wearing of stockings in bed. She hissed now:

"Girls, don't let's have it. I'll lay my gold hoops that her it was that stopped the Sunday papers and got us these silly frills for our heads. Rector, he's in her power and don't come here now. Don't let's have what she says we're to have!"

"You can't stop her putting it in," Lizzie Payne quavered.

Sarah, with a very meaning glance round the company, quoted an adage: "You can take a donkey to the well, but can't make him drink."

"We'll have to go *somewhere,*" Rachel Burch croaked, meditatively stroking her pinched nostrils.

"We'll find a way," Sarah said mysteriously. "We'll teach her not to bring her awful newfangled contraptions where they're not

welcome." She began again, snorting fresh anger over the massive teapot. "Didn't we ought to have been *asked* first, didn't . . ."

Elderly Nancy Sheet made her comment too. No one knew what it was, for she always spoke deep down in her chest, like a rumble, and the words never managed to come out. But Sarah said, nodding her head, "Yes, Nancy, that's right." Some of the women called Nancy "Grannie," she was so old—over a hundred, it was believed. Her photo had been in a newspaper.

II

The contraption was installed, amid silence from the women. It took some days to build and was attached to the back of one of the houses: the one shared by Ida Neate and Susie Eighteen. Also a patch of sward was torn up to carry a pipe and Ida's bed of double stocks ruined, greatly vexing her. Ida it was who broke the women's malign silence by leaning out of her little trellised window like an infuriated Judy and shouting to the workmen:

"Donkey you can take to the well, but can't make him drink."

Sunning themselves in their porches or on the little squares of lawn, the women sent each other meaning glances. One or two of them dug peaceably into their flower-patches, tending marigolds, sweet williams and pansies. Sarah, who could stretch herself and mount a ladder without getting giddy, was clipping the rose that clambered so thickly, showering a myriad pink blossoms, over Nancy's house. Except for the clatter of the workmen behind, the afternoon quiet seemed to purr like a drowsy cat.

It was disturbed just before tea-time by Mrs. Hope-Cary, who lifted the latch of the gate with a decisive click and swept up the gravel. Tall, well-dressed and painted bright as a barber's pole, she was full of undiminished energy, though sixty. Wife of an architect over in the city, she had been childless. No one rose to greet her, though the lady lifted her hand like a queen acknowledging huzzas.

"Well," she said briskly, "how is the work proceeding?" She swung to the back of Ida's house, but only glanced at the contraption for one discreet moment. Returned to the lawns, she said, loudly, since she was speaking to the old, "It is time you women received the benefits of modern methods."

Silence—except for the clip-clip of Sarah's shears among the

climber. But Mrs. Hope-Cary was busy examining the flower-borders. She hovered near Lizzie Payne, who was crouched doubtfully in a kind of half-stoop, neither up nor down, trowel in hand.

"The violas are charming," Mrs. Hope-Cary told her graciously. "But all your flowers are charming. You have green fingers, Mrs. Payne."

Startled-looking, Lizzie peered at her hands. "Black, mum," she mumbled, very innocently, "begging your pardon. It's the dirt——"

"Oh come, come," the lady smiled, "I don't mean literally. In the country, we say of a successful gardener that he has green fingers. Surely you were reared in the country? Otherwise you wouldn't be in our Almshouses."

"Seventy-six years in this same village, mum," Lizzie said mildly. "I was married here and 'ad——"

Sarah had climbed down quickly from the ladder and gone into her house. A lattice was flung back with a bang, Sarah popped out an arm and shrilly rang the tea-bell.

"Ah, there goes your tea-bell," Mrs. Hope-Cary murmured.

"Yes, mum," said Lizzie, her gaze wide and innocent.

"I do hope you women," said Mrs. Hope-Cary in dismissal, "don't still drink your tea black?"

"No, mum." The lady had already given them a talk on the evils of strong tea.

"So bad for your digestions," she murmured, peering to examine a clump of very gay poppies.

The old ladies took tea all together. Mrs. Hope-Cary had departed, with a brisk slam of the gate. Lizzie Payne rocked with frail laughter. She was the most easily amused of the bunch. Shuddering giggles shook her. "Green fingers," she gasped, "green fingers! Lawk a'day, it's a mercy I haven't got a green mind."

"You didn't ought to have gossiped with her," said Sarah severely. "Haughty, that's what we've got to be now." She pressed the cosy down tightly and smotheringly over the pot. "Haughty and proud."

And though her face still retained its sweet old-woman's look, she croaked to them in sinister warning: "Horrible contraption will be ready come Saturday."

III

One afternoon three weeks later Sarah, surrounded by all the other ladies, stood carefully arraying herself in her best. They were black clothes with a dash of puce here and there, and voluminous. Her face was already very austere in preparation, though a misty patch of colour glowed in her cheeks.

"My locket, Ena," she asked. Ena passed over Sarah's head the long gold chain with its heavy pendant. Sarah tucked the pendant, which contained a photo of her late husband's head and a shred of his hair, into her satin waist-band.

"Don't you break down now," quavered Jane King, who was nearly always in a state of fear and whining. "Don't you let 'em fret you."

"I'm not likely to be fretted," answered Sarah, indignantly—"no, not if they was a lot of Red Indians."

"It'll be best to keep your temper and be a lady," advised Cissie Stand, who had been a lady's maid in her time.

Lizzie Payne tied the bonnet strings firmly under Sarah's roused chin. "Not so tight Lizzie," she grunted, "I won't be able to move my jaw properly to them." A bunch of ancient artificial violets bobbed under the poke.

She set out in good time, accompanied to the gate by all the women, who twittered further advice and encouragement: two wept. Remind the Committee of this and that scandalous deprivation. Remember how Chrissie Inge had asked for gin the day she died and was denied it. Sarah planted her umbrella firmly before her and began her auspicious walk to the village hall. The sun shone brightly on the rusty black satin. She looked neither to left nor right, but kept on like an old war-horse roused once again by the sound of cannon. She reached the village hall a little out of wind.

The members of the Committee sat in a long line at the table, all facing her.

"Come in, come in, Mrs. Crump," called the Rector kindly. "Please be seated there." He pointed to a chair.

She lowered herself with careful dignity to the cane chair. All the six ladies of the Committee were present, and four men. Mrs. Hope-Cary sat next to the Rector and had before her a pile of

papers, which she was sharply looking through: she hadn't even glanced up. When later she did look up, Sarah caught instantly her hostile stare.

"We . . . we'll attend to your little matter in a moment, Mrs. Crump," said the Rector. And for a while they talked of accounts. Sarah felt rather dashed. But she had time to get back her wind and cool down. She gazed admiringly now and again at smart Colonel Cole, who wore an eyeglass: since she was a girl he had always been her idea of a man and her secret beau. She used to go hot when he galloped past her on his horse, going to barracks. She experienced no such trouble now, but felt his equal in experience of the goings-on of this world.

"Ah, now, Mrs. Crump," said the Rector at last.

"Yes, sir," she spoke up, neither too bold nor too meek.

"Perhaps Mrs. Crump would like a glass of water," said Colonel Cole, pointing to the flask on the table.

She declined, but the Colonel's thought warmed her through, as if she'd drunk a glass of whisky. She wondered if she ought to stand. There seemed a great deal of clearing of throats and uttering of ahs and m'ms among the Committee: the Rector was rubbing his nose as though in perplexity. Mrs. Hope-Cary tapped her pencil against the pile of papers and looked cold. At last the Rector adjusted his pince-nez more firmly and began:

"We have asked you to come here, Mrs. Crump, because we know that you are . . . um . . . shall we say, the uncrowned queen of the ladies of our Almshouses——"

"You were the May Queen in '75, if I remember rightly, Sarah Crump?" asked elderly Sam Lime, grinning in his beard.

Sarah flushed with pleasure and nodded prettily. Fancy old Sam Lime remembering after all these years! Really, all the men looked pleasantly disposed towards her. But Mrs. Hope-Cary did not. A quick glance at the lady's frowning face kept Sarah from weakening. The other ladies looked as though they had withdrawn all expression from their faces, even nice Mrs. Gascoyne, who sent pots of bramble jelly to the Almshouses.

"And I'm sure," added the Rector gallantly, "that Mrs. Crump even now could dance round the maypole as friskily as any of our young lassies."

"Hear, hear," said the other men.

She began to feel a little uncomfortable. Were they buttering

her up because some dreadful punishment hung in the offing? But she would not allow her little say to go unsaid, whatever they threatened. She waited in a determined calm. The Rector quickly whisked back into seriousness and began again:

"Well, Mrs. Crump, we have asked you to come here in the hope that you will be able to give us some explanation of this, this . . . recent behaviour in the Almshouses over the . . . ah . . . matter of the recent installation." In his difficulty he turned to the lady next to him, "Mrs. Hope-Cary, I understand there is an unanimous decision in the Almshouses about this——"

"A peculiar obstinacy," said Mrs. Hope-Cary sharply. "Mrs. Crump, I'm sorry to say, is the ringleader and all the women treat the installation as though it were not there." She was silent for a moment, then could not resist adding, "Wicked, wicked and foolish!"

Sarah began to burn again. She had an impulse to loosen herself and let go. But she felt her neck go stiff. Once a princess had passed through the village and bowed her head at Sarah Crump as she passed. Sarah bowed hers now in imitation towards Mrs. Hope-Cary and said:

"Thank you, mum, for speaking so plain."

The Rector began again, more hastily, "You must realise, Mrs. Crump, that the installation has meant a great deal of expense. It is up-to-date. The Committee is at a loss to understand why the Almshouse ladies . . . ah . . . scorn it."

Mrs. Crump rose to her feet. A stout dignity was in her every curve. This was the moment, she judged. And without bitterness or spite, but in a simple way, she said:

"Well, sir, it's because me and the ladies can't bring ourselves to sit over water."

There was a silence in the room. No one seemed to know what to say. But Sarah was pleased to notice that Mrs. Hope-Cary reddened with annoyance. Sarah gave them quite a time to reply and then began again, gazing meekly at the Rector:

"You see, sir, if I'm so allowed to speak, us women are all old, as you know, sir, and got set in our ways. We never had truck with such as this contraption. We are well satisfied with the old place and want to use it always, with your kind permission"—she swept her look across the row of faces—"sirs and ma'ams. Newfangled notions don't suit us, and the ladies was upset

already by having our brown stout changed for that mild dinner ale with no body to it, and having the Sunday papers took from us too in the middle of the serial that Mrs. Ida Neate was reading out to us. Begging your pardon for speaking and since we have many comforts in the Almshouses." And she sat down quietly, perspiring a little.

The Rector still seemed overcome. Mrs. Hope-Cary had screwed up her eyes and the ginger powder on her face looked cracked. "But, my good woman, this is nonsense," she snapped. And she added ruthlessly: "The old place will be taken away."

Sarah repeated with a stubbornness that made the words solid as rock, "The ladies won't sit over water."

Mrs. Flower then said something about modern hygiene and afterwards Colonel Cole and Mrs. Gascoyne tried to coax Sarah. But to no avail. Old age gleamed with obstinate pride in Sarah's eye. She repeated again and again that the ladies were set in their ways and m[illegible] she implied that to interfere with the habits of their very long lives was the direst cruelty. But what would they do, bravely enquired a member at last, if the old place was taken away? With equal bravery Sarah replied that they would then use the hedges betwixt the fields. It became quite a long, exhausting meeting.

An hour after her entrance Sarah made her exit, knowing in her bones that triumph was hers, though the Committee made such a show of being vexed. The old place would never be taken away. And she had left in the village hall a cunning suggestion that Mrs. Hope-Cary's so-called 'improvements' only made the women unwell. Opinions varied about 'improvements'. Perhaps, Sarah thought, as she hurried home, longing for a nice strong cup of good black tea, Mrs. Hope-Cary would now resign.

All the women were waiting in the garden for Sarah's return. Slowly they followed her in procession into her house. Tea was laid ready. "Make it strong, Ida " panted Sarah, as Ida lifted the lid of the teapot, "I been talking heavy." Sympathetic hands removed her bonnet and shoes. When all was ready, the women seated about Sarah in expectant silence, she, after taking three quick saucers of tea, launched into a minute word-for-word description of her ordeal. Her listeners breathed excitedly as the tale rose. At last, in anguish, Lizzie Payne could contain herself no longer: she quavered entreatingly:

"Tell us now, Sarah, if they're going to let us keep the old place! We been waiting so long all the afternoon."

"Yes, tell us," cried the others.

Sarah eyed the plateful of cake, which was fast diminishing. She had had no opportunity to eat. So she brought her recital drastically to a close.

"Yes," she said, flatly and confidently, "we'll keep it."

The ladies sighed in relief. Each thought affectionately of the old place, cosy and familiar, with its seat tacked over with rabbit-fur.

"And what's more," added Sarah clairvoyantly, "I'll lay all I got that *Madame* Hope-Cary will resign."

She was right. The lady withdrew from the Committee shortly afterwards, going in more for politics: it was rumoured that she would be the Tory candidate at the next election. The women of the Almshouses are often malicious about her in a sweet kind of way, to visitors. And if you are a liked visitor, they will point out to you the famous unused contraption, now derelict.

Revelation

I

THE MEN OF THE DAY SHIFT were threading their way out of the colliery. The cage had just clanked up into the daylight, the tightly packed men had poured out and deposited their lamps, the cage swishing down again for the next lot, and, hitching their belts and shaking themselves in the sunlight, these released workers of the underworld began their journey over the hill down to the squat grey town that was in the bed of the valley. As he was passing the power-house, just before depositing his lamp, one of these colliers heard his name called from its doorway:

"Gomer Vaughan. A moment, please."

Gomer went over to the man who called him.

"You live near my house, don't you, Vaughan? I wonder would you mind calling there to tell my wife I won't be home until about eight this evening? I've got a job on here, tell her,

and I can't leave it. You see, she's expecting me now. . . . Hope it's no trouble?"

Of course it wasn't. Gomer was glad to take the chief engineer's message. Montague was liked by all the miners: a chief engineer with sympathetic principles, though an Englishman. Gomer nodded and resumed his way, soon regaining the particular companions with whom he always walked home. They were all young men.

"What the blighter want?" asked one.

Gomer told him.

"She's a beauty, she is," said another, meaning Mrs. Montague. "Proud of herself, too, strutting about and looking as though the world's no more than ninepence to her."

"Got something to be proud of she has," returned a short terrier-looking fellow, perking himself to have his say. "A sprightlier bird never trod on two legs. Half French, they say. She makes our lot look like a crowd of wet and panicky hens. Got something our skirts don't seem to have."

"I wouldn't," said the eldest of them critically, "swop her for my old 'ooman. Too much opinion of herself she has, by the look on her. A spirited mare she is in the house, I bet."

Gomer said nothing. He was the latest married of the company. He did not want to say anything on this subject of women. Though he could say a lot, by God he could! He could let flow some language—a lot of language. But he held himself tight, his eye glittering, while the others went on as men will, saying what they'd up and do if any woman had too much lip and bossiness. He had been married a year: and he was all raw and fiery from his encounters with Blodwen. God, he never thought a woman could be so contrary. Soft and simpering as she was before they married. . . . Well, he'd show her yet. . . . And as the colliers swung along together Gomer planked his huge nailed boots down on the pavement with a vicious firmness.

They had descended the hill, and as they reached the long dismal rows of dwellings that constituted the town, they separated to climb to their different homes. Gomer lived in the last row reaching up the side of the greyish-green hill. At the end of this row was a detached house, where the engineer and his wife lived. The lonely bare hill swept up above it. Gomer had to pass his own cottage to climb to the villa.

It was a warm, sunny summer's afternoon. There was a soft mist in the still air. Gomer wished there was a country lane of shady trees with a clean stream running near, in this part of Wales. He would have liked to stroll there in peace that evening. But no—after his meal and bath there would be nowhere to go but the street corners, the miserable pub, or the bare uninviting hills. Ah, what a life! Gomer sighed. The same thing day after day. Down to the pit, up again, food, bath, quarrel with Blodwen, slam the door and then a miserable couple of hours trying to jaw to the fellows on the street corner, and back home to see Blodwen's face with the jibe on it still.

He cleared his throat and spat before opening the gate of the garden. He had had enough of her tantrums, and if she wanted a fight he was ready for her. Trying to dictate to him, just as her mother had tried it on him. Save up to buy a piano indeed! And no one in the house who could play it. He'd give her piano! . . . He knocked the shining brass image on the villa door y :d glanced about. Natty house. Bright little garden—a rose ga licn. There were bushes and bushes of them: he'd never seen big red and white roses. And such a smell! He almost as he breathed in and emitted the perfume.

No one had answered his knock. He turned ked again. Where was the servant? Keeping him han like this. He wanted his dinner. He knocked agai ere came sounds of steps, upstairs it seemed, and as the steps sounded nearer, hurrying downstairs, a shrill voice called:

"Can't you wait a minute, darling!"

It was Mrs. Montague, of course, Gomer said to himself. She thought her husband was at the door. And there was laughter and excitement in her voice. Ah, that was the way to greet a tired husband coming home from work. An excited voice calling 'darling'. Made a man think a woman was worthy to be a wife. . . . The door was flung wide open.

Gomer's tongue clave in astonishment to his mouth. The gaping silence lasted several moments. A naked woman stood before him, and then slowly, slowly retreated, her fist clenched in the cleft between her breasts.

"Mr. . . . Mr. . . . Montague asked me . . ." stammered Gomer, and could not switch his rigid gaze from the apparition. How lovely she was!

". . . . told me . . ." he went on humbly, ". . . said . . ." His voice dropped and he stared at her like one possessed.

She turned at the foot of the stairs . . . fled up: and it was like the flutter of some great white bird to heaven.

". . . told me to tell you he couldn't come home at all until eight o'clock just . . ." suddenly bawled Gomer into the empty passage-way.

He waited a few seconds, wondering if she would answer. He heard her hurry about upstairs. Then she appeared again, wrapped now in a loose blue garment. Her face was flushed as she came down the stairs, but as she advanced to him she laughed. By God, how she laughed! Gomer felt his blood run. She wasn't ashamed, not she. And still her white feet were bare. They were bare and flawless and like lilies pressed on the floor.

"What is that about my husband?" she asked easily.

Gomer told her. Under the pit-dirt his cheeks burned.

She thanked him very prettily: and then she said:

"I thought it was he at the door. I'm sure you'll understand. I was having a bath. You are married, I expect?"

Gomer nodded. She looked up at his gazing eyes again in a queer laughing way and said in dismissal:

"Oh, well. Thank you very much for the message."

He turned at last, and the door closed. He stepped out of the porch and, his eyes lifted in thoughtful amazement, made his way slowly to the gate. Never before had he seen a naked woman. Not a live one. Only in pictures. Respectable women—it had always been understood—kept themselves a mystery to men. But was that quite right? Ought they to keep themselves such a mystery? When they were so beautiful. Surely Mrs. Montague was respectable enough! Her husband was a fine respected man too. He wouldn't have things done that weren't right. . . . Gomer suddenly made a decision that it was quite natural for a woman to meet her husband naked. It was lovely too.

As he opened the gate he saw a rose-bush stretched up the wall. There were several curled pink-flushed roses. One bloom wouldn't be missed. His hand immediately snatched a flower, and, when he got outside the gate, he laid it in his food-tin.

Gomer's shoulders seemed squared and defiant as he went down at a quickened pace to his cottage. He was going to make his peace with Blodwen. But he was not going to be a namby-

pamby fool either. After all, she was his wife: and he was not an unreasonable man. He had been quite fond of her too: and there were times when he thought her handsome enough for any man.

II

"You're late," she said accusingly. And before waiting for him to reply she went on shrilly, "Don't you blame me if the dinner's spoilt."

"Which means it is, I suppose!" he said. But he smiled at her, his good white teeth shining out in his blackened face.

"Come in at your proper time, then," she rapped out, prodding the meat viciously.

He leaned forward and playfully slapped her on the back. She uttered a scream and the meat slid off its plate, hesitated on the edge of the table and fell on the floor. His action and the ensuing accident had an exaggerated effect on Blodwen. She arched up her long neck in a tight, rigid fashion, her face flamed, and she darted out into the little scullery like an infuriated turkey.

"I've had enough," she screamed, "and more than enough."

And she banged some crockery about.

"Now then," Gomer called to her soothingly, "now *then*, my pet. What's the damage! A bit of dust on the old meat! Look, it's all right. Now, Blod, behave yourself. Where's the taters? I'm hungry."

He knew she'd find his gentle coaxing astonishing. Another time he would have hurled abuse at her. But she remained in the scullery. He sighed and went in there. She turned her back on him and went to the tap. He followed her and whispered in her pink ear.

"Now, now, what's got you, my darling! There's a way to treat a tired man who's been working hard as he can to get you a bit of dough. Turn about, Blod—and show me your face laughing, the same as you used to! Look, look what I've got you——" He lifted his hidden hand and tickled her ear with the rose, then reached it to her nose. "Smell! Put it in your blouse."

She turned and said angrily: "What do I want with a rose in my working blouse! Where did you get it whatever?" She was relenting.

"Ah, my secret that is."

"Oh, well," she said, tossing her head, "put it in a cup on the table."

During the meal she reverted again to the piano controversy. "A catalogue came today from Jones and Evans. Cheaper they seem than anyone else. There's one that works out at seven-and-six a week."

His brows were drawn in wrathfully for a moment. He did not speak. She went on talking, and at last he cropped in:

"We'll see, we'll see."

The meal finished, a big wooden tub was dragged in to the place before the fire, the mat rolled up. Blodwen, sturdy enough, lifted the huge pan of boiling water from the fire and poured it in the tub. Gomer stripped. The pit-dirt covered his body. Blodwen added cold water and Gomer stepped in the tub. While he washed she cleared away the dinner things. She was quick and deft enough in her work, and the house was bright and neat.

"I'm ready for my back," Gomer called.

"Wait a minute," she said coldly, taking the remainder of the dishes into the scullery.

So he had to wait standing in the tub with the patch of coal-dust beneath his shoulders glaring on the whiteness of the rest of his body. He knew she was exercising her own contrary will again. He might have yelled at her, but today he didn't want to. He was holding himself tight in glowing anticipation. When she came at last to rub the hand cloth over his back and swill him down, he said nothing. Only grunted when she had finished:

"Not much respect have you got for a man's naked skin, Blod. You rub me as though I'm a bit of old leather."

"Bah!" said Blodwen—"a nice little powder-puff I'll get for you."

He laughed, lingeringly and good-temperedly. He wanted to get her in a good mood. "Ah," he said with affection, "one of these days, Blod fach, perhaps you'll come to know what a nice skin your husband's got on him."

"Conceit!" she said, and would not look as he vigorously towelled himself.

Early that evening, when he sat comfortable and easy by the fire, he said to her, as she was about to go upstairs and change:

"You're not going out this evening, are you, Blod?"

"Yes. I'm going to the chapel."

"Don't you go this evening, if you please," he said.

Amazement was now evident on her face. This politeness and interference with her arrangements was quite unusual. "Oh, indeed!" she began, ready for a battle.

He cocked his tight-skinned, sturdy young head up at her. His eyes gleamed, there was an odd smile on his lips. "Well, go and change first," he said.

She shrugged her shoulders and went upstairs.

He sat waiting for her. She appeared in a peach-coloured silky dress. Her face shone clean. She was prepared for the women's meeting in the chapel. He looked at her appraisingly and said softly:

"Come here, Blod."

"What d'you want now?" she demanded, withheld in spite of her coldness. She moved near to his chair—but apparently to the mantel-shelf looking for something.

"You're looking nice tonight," he said. And he suddenly leaned out of his chair and caught her. She cried out, disliking this horse-play in her best silk dress. But he held her and she had to keep still. Then he whispered a few words in her ear.

She suddenly wrenched herself free and slapped his face. He sprang up. His face and slender tightened neck were mottled.

"Indeed," she breathed, "indeed! You rude ruffian. What d'you take me for, indeed? Please to remember I'm your wife, will you. I'll teach you to respect me, Gomer Vaughan." Yet there was an undercurrent of fear in her breathed words of contempt and horror.

But he had caught fire. His head lurched towards her. He shouted:

"That's just it, my fine lady. Remember you are my wife I'm doing. Look here, you. Enough of your silly airs and graces I've had. A lodger in this house I might be. You do what I tell you to, now."

"Never!" she screamed. "Such rudeness I've never heard of."

"What's in it?" he demanded furiously. "You see *me*, don't you, when I wash?"

She was retreating from him in obvious fear now.

"Never have I heard of such a thing!" she exclaimed. Her face was contracted, her eyes were strange and hunted. "Never. A woman is different from a man. . . . And never do I look at you . . . not in that way."

He was advancing to her. She saw the clear determination burning in his eye. With a sudden quick movement she darted out of the room and he sprang too late. She was out of the house. He heard the front door slam.

III

He knew where she had fled. Twice before, after their more furious clashings, she had hurried off to her mother's—Mrs. Hopkins, a widow, who kept a sweet-shop. Mrs. Hopkins had come up "to see him about it" afterwards. No doubt she would come this evening. He hated her.

She arrived half an hour later. Directly Gomer saw her pale, large, aggressive face, he buckled in his belt and thrust out his chin.

"What's this I hear from my Blodwen, Gomer Vaughan?" she began with [illegible] asperity. She looked startled this time too.

He uttered an exclamation of contemptuous ire.

"That daughter of yours got no right to be a wife at all, Lizzie Hopkins," he fumed. "Running to her mother like a little filly! And don't *you* come here poking your nose in this business either. You go back and tell your silly daughter to return at once to the man she's married. See?" And he turned his back on her abruptly.

"Well you might look ashamed"—Mrs. Hopkins replied in a rising voice—"well you might. Scandalous is the thing I have heard from Blodwen now just. Advice she has asked me. Gomer Vaughan, a respectable man I thought you. Please you remember that my daughter is a religious girl, brought up in a good family that's never had a breath of scandal said about them. And now you want her to be a party to these goings-on." Her voice reached a dangerous pitch. "Dreadful is this thing I have heard. Surely not fit to be married to a respectable girl you are! Shame on you, man, shame on you. What my poor dead Rowland would have said I can imagine. Why, Gomer Vaughan, for forty years I was married to him, and never once was I obliged to show myself in that awful way! Don't you fear the wrath of God, man, don't you think of His eye watching?"

Gomer retained an admirable silence through this tirade. His thumbs stuck in his belt, he spat in the fire and said:

"Pah, you narrow-minded old bigot, you."

Mrs. Hopkins began to breathe heavily.

"Insult and rudeness! Would my poor Rowland was here! And would my dear girl was single again!"

Gomer lost his balance then. He turned and shouted:

"You be quiet! What do you understand about young married people today? Interfering! Turning Blodwen's ideas the wrong way. A girl she is, isn't she then? Nothing extraordinary was it that I asked her. Only today was it I saw such a thing."

Mrs. Hopkins said quickly: "Who?"

In his ire Gomer incautiously answered, as though to strengthen his case, "Mr. Montague's wife. I——"

But Mrs. Hopkins broke in with a loud exclamation:

"Ha! So that's it, then. Ha, now I understand well enough. *She* is the one, is it? Long have I had my feelings about *her*. . . . Very well, Gomer Vaughan, very well——" And she began to back out of the room, her heavy head nodding with hidden menace, her pale eyes fixed on him triumphantly.

Gomer shouted at her:

"You send Blodwen back here at once."

Mrs. Hopkins whisked her bulky figure out of the doorway in a surprisingly swift way. "We'll see, young man," she darted back over her shoulder, "we'll see."

But Gomer had no doubts that Blodwen would return.

IV

And so she came back—sooner than he expected. Mrs. Hopkins scarcely had time to reach home and impart whatever she had to say, and Blodwen was dashing into the room where her husband sat in brooding wrath.

"You," she panted—"you been seeing that woman!"

She looked as though she wanted to leap on him. But like an enraged hound on leash she stood prancing and glaring wildly. "That's where you been, when you came home late! That's your monkey's game, is it——"

"Now, *now*, Blodwen——" he began. Then he was silent, and he did not attempt to deny her accusation. There was a wolfish grin about his mouth. Blodwen continued to heap vituperation upon him. She became wilder and wilder. And he liked her

fierce, savage beauty. She had a splendour thus. His grin widened. She became desperate.

"Not another night will I spend in this house. Gladly will my mother welcome me back——"

He decided she had reached the pinnacle of fear. He got up and went to her. She shrunk away and he followed. He took her arms firmly and with power.

"Long enough I've listened to your insults, Blod. Where did you get that idea from that I've been running loose? Eh? Has that old bitch been lying to you, then?"

"You told her you been seeing Mrs. Montague naked——"

"Well, well, and so I have——"

Blodwen struggled to be free. "Oh, oh!" she cried aloud.

"Some women there are," he said, "who are not so mean as you about their prettiness. Mrs. Montague's got very good ideas how to make her husband happy. Listen, my silly little pet . . ." and he told her of the afternoon's event.

She became quiet. Surprise, astonishment, and amazement leaped successively to her wild-coloured face. And also there came a slow and wondering dawn in her eyes. . . .

"There now," Gower finished. "See how ready you are to think evil of me. And here I came home wishing to see a better sight than Mrs. Montague could give me. And well I could have it too, only you been brought up wrong. That's where the mischief is. Too much shame you have been taught, by half."

Blodwen's head was a little low. The curve of her healthy red-gold cheek filled him with tenderness. And magnanimity. He said softly:

"I tell you what, Blod. We'll strike a bargain. You want that piano bad, don't you? Well, say now, we'll give way to one another——"

She hung her head lower. Some threads of her brown hair touched his lips. He quivered. His hand slipped over her shoulder. But she would not speak.

"—and be nice to each other," he continued, "not always squabbering as your mother and father used to do! Live in our own way we must, Blod. . . . There now, isn't she a sweet one . . . there, ah! sweet as a rose, my darling, a better pink and white than any rose's! . . . there, my pet, my angel!"

The Fashion Plate

I

"THE FASHION PLATE'S COMING——" Quickly the news would pass down the main road. Curtains twitched in front parlour windows, potted shrubs were moved or watered; some colliers' wives, hard-worked and canvas-aproned, came boldly out to the doorsteps to stare. In the dingy little shops, wedged here and there among the swart dwellings, customers craned together for the treat. Cleopatra setting out in the golden barge to meet Antony did not create more interest. There was no one else in the valley like her. Her hats! The fancy, high-heeled shoes, the brilliantly elegant dresses in summer, the tweeds and the swirl of furs for the bitter days of that mountainous district! The different handbags, gay and sumptuous, the lacy gloves, the parasols and tasselled umbrellas! And how she knew how to wear these things! Graceful as a swan, clean as a flower, she dazzled the eye.

But, though a pleasure to see, she was also incongruous, there in that grim industrial retreat pushed up among the mountains, with the pits hurling out their clouds of grit, and clanking coal wagons crossing the main road twice, and the miners coming off the shift black and primitive-looking. The women drew in their breaths as she passed. She looked as if she had never done a stroke of work in her life. Strange murmurs could be heard; she almost created a sense of fear, this vision of delicate indolence, wealth, and taste assembled with exquisite tact in one person. How could she do it? Their eyes admired but their comments did not.

Yet the work-driven women of this place, that had known long strikes, bitter poverty, and a terrible pit disaster, could not entirely malign Mrs. Mitchell. Something made them pause. Perhaps it was the absolute serenity of those twice-weekly afternoon walks that nothing except torrential rain or snow-bound roads could prevent. Or perhaps they saw a vicarious triumph of themselves, a dream become courageously real.

There remained the mystery of how she could afford all those

fine clothes. For Mrs. Mitchell was only the wife of the man in charge of the slaughterhouse. She was not the pit manager's wife (indeed, Mrs. Edwards dressed in totally different style, her never-varied hat shaped like an Eskimo's hut). Mr. Mitchell's moderate salary was known, and in such a place no one could possess private means without its being exact knowledge. Moreover, he was no match to his wife. A rough-and-ready sort of man, glum and never mixing much in the life of the place, though down in the slaughterhouse, which served all the butchers' shops for miles, he was respected as a responsible chap whose words and deeds were to be trusted. Of words he had not many.

The women wished they could curl their tongues round something scandalous. Why was Mrs. Mitchell always having her photograph taken by Mr. Burgess in his studio down an obscure yard where he worked entirely alone? But nobody felt that suspicion of Mr. Burgess, a family man and chapel deacon with a stark knobbly face above a high stiff collar, sat comfortably in the mind. The bit of talk about the two had started because one afternoon a mother calling at the studio to fix an appointment for her daughter's wedding party found Mrs. Mitchell reclining on a sofa under a bust of Napoleon. She was hatless and, in a clinging dress ("tight on her as a snake skin") and her hands holding a bunch of artificial flowers, she looked like a woman undergoing the agonies of some awful confession. Mr. Burgess certainly had his head under the black drapery of his camera, so everything pointed to yet another photograph being taken. But to have one taken *lying down*! In the valley, in those days, to have a photo taken was a rare event attended by tremendous fuss. Accompanied by advising friends or relations, one stood up to the ordeal as if going before the Ultimate Judge, and one always came out on the card as if turned to stone or a pillar of salt.

The whispering began. Yet still everyone felt that the whispering was unfair to Mr. Burgess. For thirty years he had photographed wedding parties, oratorio choirs, and silver-cup football teams in his studio, and nothing had ever been said against his conduct.

Mrs. Mitchell, coming out of her bow-windowed little house as out of a palace, took her walk as if never a breath of scandal ever polluted her pearl ear-rings. Was she aware of the general criticism? If so, did she know that within the criticism was

homage?—the homage that in bygone times would begin a dynasty of tribal queens? Was she aware of the fear, too, the puritanic dread that such lavishness and extravagance could not be obtained but at some dire cost greater even than money?

II

This afternoon her excursion was no different from the hundreds of others. It was a fine autumn day. The tawny mountains glistened like the skins of lions. She wore a new fur, rich with the bluish-black tint of grapes, and flung with just the right expensive carelessness across her well-held shoulders: it would cause additional comment. With her apparently unaware look of repose she passed serenely down the long, drab main road.

Down at the bottom of the valley the larger shops, offices, a music hall, and a railway station (together with Mr. Burgess's studio) clustered into the semblance of a town. She always walked as far as the railway station, situated down a hunchback turning, and, after appearing to be intent on its architecture for a moment, wheeled round, and with a mysterious smile began the homeward journey. Often she made small domestic purchases—her clothes she obtained from the city twenty miles away—and a[illegible]uous, t[illegible]ron-monger's wife once remarked: "Only a rolling-pin s[illegible]ed, but one would think she was buying a grand piano."

Today, outside the railway station, she happened [illegible] see her young friend Nicholas and, bending down to his ear, in her low, sweet voice breathed his name. He was twelve, wore a school satchel strapped to his back, and he was absent-mindedly paused before a poster depicting Windsor Castle. He gave a violent start and dropped a purple-whorled glass marble which rolled across the pavement, sped down the gutter, and slid into a drain. "It's gone!" he cried in poignant astonishment. "I won it dinner-time!"

"And all my fault." Her bosom was perfumed with an evasive fragrance like closed flowers. "Never mind, *I* have some marbles. Will you come and get them this evening? You've been neglecting us lately, Nicholas." She was neither arch nor patronising; he might have been a successful forty.

"I'll have to do my homework first," he said with equal formality.

"Well, come in and do it with us. You shall have your own little table, and I'll be quiet as a mouse."

They lived in the same street and though no particular friendship existed between the two households, he had been on visiting terms with the Mitchells, who were childless, for a couple of years. The change from his own noisily warring brothers-and-sisters home to the Mitchells', where he was sole little king, nourished him. To his visits his mother took a wavering attitude of doubt, half criticism and compassion; before becoming decisive she was waiting for something concrete to happen in that house.

That evening Mrs. Mitchell had six coloured glass marbles ready for him on a small table on which, neatly set out, were also a crystal ink-well, a ruler, blotter, and pencils and—yes! a bottle of lemonade with a tumbler. Very impressed by the bottle, which gave him a glimpse of easy luxury in a world hard with the snatchings and blows of his brothers and sisters, he made little fuss of the glitteringly washed marbles, which he guessed she had bought in Watkins's shop after leaving him—and in any case they had not the value of those won from bragging opponents kneeling around a circle drawn in the earth.

"Is the chair high enough, would you like a cushion? . . . You must work hard if you want to get near the top of your class, but you must *enjoy* working. . . . There! Now I'll do my sewing and not say a word."

Hers was not big, industrious sewing, complete with bee-humming machine, as at home. She sat delicately edging a tiny handkerchief with a shred of lace, and on her face was no look of minutes strained to their utmost; she had the manner of one who never glances at a clock. The house was tidy, clean, respectably comfortable. But it was shabbier than his own home. And somehow without atmosphere, as if it was left alone to look after itself and no love or hate clashed within its shiny darkly-papered walls. Occasionally this lack of something important vaguely bothered the boy. He would stand with his lip lifted, his nostrils dilated. He had never been upstairs, and he always wanted to penetrate its privacy. Was the thing he missed to be found there? Did they live up there and only come downstairs when there were visitors? Down here it was all parlour and Sunday silence, with for movement only the lonely goldfish eternally circling its bowl.

Mr. Mitchell came in before the homework was finished. "Good

evening, *sir,*" he greeted Nicholas. "Doing my accounts for me?" He seemed to look at the boy and yet not look at him. And he was not a jocular man. He had a full, dahlia-red, rather staring face of flabby contours, sagged in on its own solitude, and the eyes did not seem to connect with the object they looked at. His face had affinities with the face of some floridly ponderous beast. He had a very thick neck. It was strange, and yet not at all strange, that his work had to do with cattle.

"Do you want a meal now," Mrs. Mitchell asked in the heavy silence, "or can you wait?" Her voice was crisper; she stitched in calm withdrawal; she might have been an indifferent daughter. Though bent at the table, the boy sensed the change. There was a cold air of armistice in the room, of emptiness. Nervously he opened his bottle of lemonade. The explosion of the uncorking sounded very loud.

"I'll go upstairs," Mr. Mitchell said. "Yes, I'll go upstairs. Call me down."

"You'll hear the dishes," she said concisely. The boy turned and saw her stitching away, like a queen in a book of tales. Mr. Mitchell went out bulkily; his head lolled on the fleshy neck. It was as if he said "Pah!" in a heavily angry way. His footsteps were ponderous on the staircase.

Had he come straight from the slaughterhouse and was weary? Had he a short time ago been killing cattle? Nicholas, like all the boys of the place, was interested in the slaughterhouse, a squat building with pens and sties in a field down by the river. Once he had been allowed inside by an amiable young assistant who understood his curiosity, and he saw in a whitewashed room hung with ropes and pulleys a freshly dead bullock strung up in the air by its legs; it swayed a little and looked startlingly foolish. Blood spattered the guttered floor and some still dripped from the bullock's mouth like a red icicle. In a yard another young man was rinsing offal in a tub filled with green slime. "No, we're not killing pigs today," he replied to Nicholas's enquiry. Because of the intelligent squeals and demented hysteria of these intuitive beasts as they were chased from the sties into the house of death, pig-killing was the prized spectacle among all the boys. But few had been fortunate enough to witness it; the slaughtermen usually drove them away from the fascinating precincts. Nicholas, an unassertive boy on the whole, had never liked to take advantage

of his friendship with the Mitchells and ask to be taken to the place properly, an accredited visitor on a big day. He wondered if Mrs. Mitchell went there herself sometimes. Could she get him a pig's bladder?

She did not bring in supper until he had finished the homework. "There, haven't I been quiet?" She smiled. "Did you work easily? I can see you're studious and like quiet. Do you like lobster too?"

"Lobster?" He looked at her vacantly.

She fetched from the kitchen an oval dish in which lay a fabulous scarlet beast. Cruel claws and quiveringly fine feelers sprang from it. At first he thought that Mr. Mitchell must have brought it from the slaughterhouse, but when his excitement abated he remembered they came from the sea. "How did you get it?" he asked, astonished.

"I have to ask Harris's fish shop to order one especially for me. I'm the only customer here that wants them."

"Do they cost a lot?"

Over the fiery beast she looked at him conspiratorially. "Nothing you enjoy ever costs a lot." She smiled.

Mr. Mitchell must have heard the dishes. But he came down looking more torpid than ever. "Lobster again!" he said, sombrely. "At night! There's stomachs of cast-iron in this world."

Mrs. Mitchell looked at him frigidly. "If you encourage nightmares they'll come," she said.

"You're not giving it to the boy?" he said.

"Why not? You'll have a little, Nicholas?" Of course he would.

"I have dreams," said Mr. Mitchell, his heavy, dark-red face expressionless. "Yes, *I* have dreams."

"Do you?" Her husband might have been an acquaintance who had called at an inopportune time. "A little salad, Nicholas? Shall I choose it for you?" In delightful performance she selected what seemed the best pieces in the bowl; with deft suggestions she showed him how to eat the lobster. He enjoyed extracting from inside a crimson scimitar shreds of rosily white meat. The evening became remarkable for him.

And it was because of it that he added to the local legend of Mrs. Mitchell. When he told them at home about the lobster there was at first a silence. His mother glanced up, his brothers and

sisters were impressed. He felt superior. A couple of weeks later, while he waited to be served in Watkins's shop just after Mrs. Mitchell had passed the window on her return from her walk, he heard a collier's wife say: "Yes, and they say she has lobsters for breakfast nearly every day. No doubt her new hat she wears at breakfast, too, to match them." Despite his sense of guilt, he felt himself apart, an experienced being. No one else in the place was known to have dealings with the exotic fish.

"She'll be giving him champagne next," he heard his father say to his mother. "Mitchell, poor devil, will be properly in the soup some day." And his mother said, troubled: "Yes, I *do* wonder if Nick ought to go there——"

III

That winter Mrs. Mitchell won a £100 prize in a periodical which ran a competition every week. You had to make up a smart remark on a given phrase and send it in with a sixpenny postal order. A lot of people in the place did it; someone else had won £10, which set more members of both sexes running to the Post Office. It seemed quite in order that Mrs. Mitchell, who dressed like no one else, should win a cracker of a prize, but everybody was agog the day the news got around.

"You'll be going to see her every day now," Nicholas's eldest brother jeered, adding offensively: "Take your money-box with you." And his father said to his mother, in that secret-knowledge way which roused an extra ear inside one: "If she's got any feeling, she'll hand that prize to Mitchell straight away." To this his mother said: "Not she!"

A week later, with Christmas not far off, Mrs. Mitchell took her afternoon walk in a new fur coat. It shone with opulent gleams, as if still alive, and its owner walked with the composure of one who owns three hundred and sixty-five fur coats. It was treated to a companionable new hat into which a blue quill was stabbed cockily as a declaration of independence. Her red-tasselled umbrella, exquisitely rolled, went before her with a hand attached lightly as a flower. The women watchers down the long, bleak road gathered and stared with something like consternation. Surely such luxury couldn't proceed for ever? The God of Prudence, who had made his character known in abundant scriptures, must surely hurl one of his thunderbolts right in her path some day.

That same evening Nicholas visited the Mitchells' house. And he found Mrs. Mitchell delicately shedding a few tears into a lacy wisp of the finest linen. He could not take this restrained sort of weeping seriously. Especially as she had just won a big prize. "Have you got a headache?" he asked.

She blew her pretty nose and dried her tears. "I'm glad you've come. It keeps Mr. Mitchell quiet." Pointing to the ceiling, she whispered dramatically: "He's just gone up. . . . Oh dear!" she sighed.

"What is he always doing upstairs?" It did not now take him long to adjust himself to being treated as a grown-up.

"Oh, only sleeping. . . . He's a man that seems to need a great deal of sleep. He says he gets bad dreams, but I believe he likes them." She smiled at him with dainty malice. "Do you know what he wanted? . . . My prize!" Nicholas looked thoughtful, like one privy to other knowledge. She went on: "Week after week I worked so hard at those competitions, and he never helped me, it was all my own brains." Her eyes shone with that refined malice. "To tell you the truth, *he isn't clever.* Not like you and me." She giggled. "Oh dear, don't look so solemn, Nicholas; I've had a very trying day."

"I have too," he said.

"Have you, darling? Would you like a chocolate?" She jumped up and fetched a ribboned box from the sideboard. They ate in release from the stress. But he could see that her attention was on something else, and presently she resumed: "He found out today that I had spent the prize on a fur coat. Oh, good gracious, such a fuss!" She rummaged for other chocolates. "An almond one this time? Nougat? I don't like the peppermint ones, do you? We'll keep them for Mr. Mitchell. . . . Of course, people do criticise me," she said, wrinkling her nose. "You must not repeat what I've said, Nicholas."

"Oh no," he said, decided but flushing. Memory of the lobster affair still obscurely troubled him.

"Gentlemen do not," she said. "As you know."

"I'm going to visit my grandmother after Christmas," he said awkwardly.

Suddenly footsteps sounded on the stairs, descending with pronounced deliberation. And Mrs. Mitchell seemed to draw herself in, like a slow, graceful snail into its shell. The door

opened, and Mr. Mitchell stood there in a bowler hat and overcoat, bulky and glowering. Even his ragged moustache looked as if it was alive with helpless anger—anger that would never really shoot out or even bristle. "Am going out," he said, in a low, defeated growl. Of Nicholas he took no notice. "Going out," he repeated. "Yes."

"You are going out," she murmured, remote in her shell. Her eyelids were down as if against some rude spectacle.

"Yes." Something in his heavy neck throbbed, making it thicker. Yet there was nothing threatening in his mien. His slow, ox-coloured eyes travelled from his wife's face to the large pink box of chocolates on her knees. "I hope," he then said, "you'll always be able to afford 'um."

She asked faintly: "What time will you be back? Supper will——"

"Going to the slaughterhouse," he said sullenly. "Got a job to do."

"—will be ready at nine," she said.

"Ha!" he said. He stared at her shut face. But the heavy glaze of his unlit eyes threw out no communication. The boy looked round. Feeling at a loss, he glanced uneasily at Mrs. Mitchell, and saw that a peculiar, almost dirtily grey, tint blotched her face. "Ha!" repeated Mr. Mitchell. The large, sagged face hung down over his swollen neck. For a moment he looked vaguely menacing. Then he tramped into the hallway. The front door slammed.

Mrs. Mitchell opened her eyes wide at the slam. "Oh dear!" she wailed faintly. Her eyes were different, darker, almost black. "He never says very much," she fluttered, "but he stands there *looking*. . . . Good gracious!" She bit a chocolate mechanically and winced in chagrin as if it held a flavour she did not like. "It seems he's having a very busy time in the slaughterhouse," she went on erratically; "some sheep have come in. . . . Ah well!" She jumped up again. "You haven't seen my new photographs."

Once again they sat over the album; she inserted a copy of the new photograph. There she was in about thirty different representations, but whether she was sad or smiling, dreamy or vivacious, aloof or inviting, it was clear that the eye of Mr. Burgess's camera found itself in concord with its elegant object. For nearly an hour she pored over the album with an exaggerated, detailed

interest, demanding once more his opinion. Her voice was high, her manner hurried. "Isn't this your favourite? It's mine too. Why do you like it so much?"

He thought carefully. "You look as though you're just going for a holiday to the seaside," he said finally.

"It's true I was happy that day. At the time I thought we were going to move to London. . . . Then Mr. Mitchell refused to take the job he was offered there." Her voice sharpened remarkably. "He refused. . . . The fact is, he has no ambition." Suddenly she snapped the album shut, rose with a bright restlessness. "Will you come down to the slaughterhouse with me, Nicholas?"

At last the invitation! He agreed with alacrity and thought of the envy of the other boys.

"If you are with me, Mr. Mitchell won't be so disagreeable." She hurried upstairs, and returned in her new fur coat and the coquettish toque. "Come, I didn't realise we had sat here so long. . . . I can't have him sulking and going without his supper," she explained.

The starlight night was cold. There were few people in the streets. The secret mountains smelled grittily of winter. Somewhere a dog barked insistent, shut out from a house. The public-house windows were clouded with yellow steam, and in a main-street house a woman pulled down a blind on a lamplit front parlour where sat Mr. Hopkins the insurance agent beside a potted fern. They crossed the main street and took a sloping road trailing away into waste land. Odorous of violets and dark fur, Mrs. Mitchell walked with a surprisingly quick glide; Nicholas was obliged to trot. They heard the icy cry of the river below, flinging itself unevenly among its stone-ragged banks. She said nothing now.

The slaughterhouse stood back in its field, an angular array of black shadows. No light showed there. Mrs. Mitchell fumbled at the fence gate of the field. "I've only been here once," she said, "when I brought down the telegram saying his father had died." She paused doubtfully. "There's no light." But the gate was unlocked.

"There are windows at the back," Nicholas urged; "there's a little office at the side." But he himself was disappointed. It seemed unlikely that slaughtering was proceeding among those silent shadows.

They walked up the cobbled path. There was a double door leading into a stone-floored paddock; it swung loose. Inside, a huge sliding door led into the main slaughter chamber; this did not yield to their push. Then Nicholas remembered the smaller door at the side; he turned its knob, and they walked into a white-washed passage lit at the end by a naked blue gas-jet. "The office is down there," he said. He felt morose and not implicated. He remembered glancing into the office during his previous visit; it was no more than a large box with a table and chair and files and ledgers. They walked down the stone-flagged passage. She stopped. He heard her breathing.

"Go back," she said.

Sharpened by her tone of command, he looked up at her. Her nostrils, blue in the gaslight, were quivering. He looked down quickly. From under a door a stream of dark, thick liquid had crawled. It was congealing on the stone flag into the shape of a large root or a strand of seaweed. He looked at it, only distantly conscious of her further cry and her fingers pressing into his shoulders. "Go back; go home!" she exclaimed. He did not move.

She stepped to the door as if oblivious of him. But she carefully avoided the liquid root. She turned the brass knob, slowly pushed back the door. Still the boy had not moved. He could not see inside the door. She gave a queer cry, not loud, a low, hunted cry, broken in her mouth. And Nicholas never forgot the gesture with which her hand went to her throat. He ran forward from the wall. At the same time his feet instinctively avoided the dark smears. "Let me see!" he cried. But she pulled back the door. "Let me see!" he cried. It was then he became conscious of another odour, a whiff from the closing door mingled with the perfume of fur and violets.

She violently pushed him back. "Go home at once!" There was something like a terrible hiss in her voice. He looked up in confusion. Her face, blotched with a sickly pallor, was not the elegantly calm face he knew; the joints and muscles had loosened and were jerking convulsively. It was as if the static photograph of a pleasing face had in some nightmare way suddenly broken into ugly grimaces. For a moment he stared aghast at that face. Then he backed from her.

Her eyes seemed not to see him. "Go!" she screamed, even more startlingly. Then he swiftly turned and ran.

IV

Three days later, carrying a large bunch of chrysanthemums from his mother, he walked down to the Mitchells' house. He went with a meek unwillingness, but not unconscious of the drama in which he was involved. All those three days the place had hummed with talk of the Mitchells. Within living memory there had been only one local suicide before.

Already there was pre-knowledge of the bailiffs who were only waiting for the coffin to leave the house before taking possession. The dead man's affairs were in shocking condition. Besides forcing him to mortgage his house several years ago, the Fashion Plate had bullied him into going to moneylenders. . . . And, no, she was not a nagging woman, but she got her way by slyly making him feel inferior to her. She had done him honour by marrying him and he must pay for what was necessary to her selfish happiness.

At first Nicholas's mother had said he must not visit the house again. Then that evening—the inquest had taken place the previous day—she told him to take the flowers. His unwillingness surprised her and, oddly enough, made her more decided that he should go on this compassionate errand. He frowned at the flowers but sheltered them from the wind. He wondered if it was true that the Mitchells' house was going to be sold up, and if so could he ask for the goldfish.

When Mrs. Mitchell opened the door he looked at her with a furtive nervousness. But, except for the deep black of her shinily flowing new frock, she was no different. "Oh, Nicholas darling!" she greeted him, with the same composed smile as before the event. And she accepted the flowers as if they were for an afternoon-tea vase. She was alone in the house. But twice there was a caller who was taken privately into the front room for a short while.

"You haven't brought your homework with you?" she asked. He was a little shocked. Upstairs lay the dead man in his coffin. She sat making calculations and notes in a little book. A heap of black-edged stationery lay on the table. The pit hooter sounded. There were silences. He looked at the goldfish eternally circling its bowl. "What do you feed it with?" he murmured at length.

"Black gloves," she said inattentively; "do you think I could find a decent pair in this hole of a place!"

Out of the corners of his eyes he kept on glancing at her, furtively. Once she remarked: "You are very distant this evening, Nicholas." Then, as his silences did not abate, she asked suddenly: "Well, haven't you forgiven me?" He looked confused, and she added: "For pushing you away so rudely in the slaughterhouse." The cloudy aloofness in his mind crystallised then, and he knew he indeed bore her a grudge. She had deprived him of something of high visual interest. In addition he was not yet reconciled to the revelation of how she had *looked*. . . . "Oh, it doesn't matter," he mumbled, with hypocritical carelessness. He stared again at the goldfish. "What do you feed the goldfish with?" he repeated.

"You must take that goldfish away with you tonight. Otherwise those dreadful men will stick a number on the bowl and get half a crown for it. . . . Would you like to see Mr. Mitchell now?" As he did not reply at once but still looked owlish, she said: "Well, come along upstairs." He rose and followed her, in half forgiveness. "I don't like being depressed, it doesn't suit me," she complained; "I feel quite old."

Her fresh poplin skirts hissed as she climbed. "Poor Mr. Mitchell," she sighed, "I do wish I could feel more sorry for him. But I'm afraid his nature made him melancholy, though I must say as a young man he wasn't so difficult. . . . And he used to be quite handsome, in a footballer kind of way. . . . Ah!" she said, shaking her head, "these beefy sportsman types, they're often quite neurotic, just bundles of nerves. . . . Oh, it's all been so unpleasant," she went on, with a dainty squirm of repudiation, "but I must own he had the decency to do it *down there*."

Upstairs there were the same four rooms as in his own home. She took him into the end back room and turned on the light. It seemed to be the room where they had slept; there were brushes on the dressing-table and a man's jacket was still flung across a chair. On the bed lay a coffin. It sank heavily into the mattress. The lid lay against a wall. "You won't want to be here long," she suggested, and left him to his curiosity. He saw her go across the landing to the main front room and put on the light there. She left both doors open.

He looked into the coffin. Mr. Mitchell wore a crisp white shroud which somehow robbed him of the full powerfulness of

being a man. And his face, with the dark red flabbiness drained out of it, was not his. He looked as if he had been ill in bed for a long time but was now secure in a cold sort of health. Round his throat a folded white napkin was tightly swathed. This linen muffler, together with the shroud, gave him an air of being at the mercy of apparel he himself would not have chosen. Nicholas's round eyes lingered on the napkin.

He left the room feeling subdued and obedient. The cold isolation of the dead man lying helpless in that strange clothing made him feel without further curiosity; there was nothing to astonish, and nothing to startle one into fearful pleasure.

Mrs. Mitchell heard him come out and called: "What do you think of this, Nicholas?" He went along the landing to the fully illuminated front room and saw at once it was where she slept. The room was perfumed and untidy with women's clothes strewn everywhere. Hadn't Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell used the same room, then, like other married people? He looked around with renewed inquisitiveness. A large cardboard hatbox lay open on the bed. From it Mrs. Mitchell was taking a spacious black hat on which the wings of a glossy blackbird were trimly spread in flight. Standing before the mirror, she carefully put on the hat.

Even he could see it was an important hat. She turned and smiled with her old elegant brilliance. "I'm wearing it to London as soon as Mr. Mitchell is buried. My sister is married to a publican there. . . . Do you like it?" she asked in that flattering way that had always nourished him and made him feel that he was a full-size man of opinions.

Alice's Pint

Evans Cockles, who was giving up business, sold his donkey to Griffiths Fruit and Vegetables, who had just come to the vale. The very first day that Griffiths took her out with the cart, Alice—that was the moke's name—drew up sharp and unbid outside the Rose and Crown, which is half-way up the vale.

"Hoy," Griffiths shouted, twitching the reins, "come on now,

gee up." Alice looked round, gave a little belly-shake, but did not budge. Griffiths flicked the whip. "Go on, gee up with you, now then!" Alice only whinnied protestingly. Griffiths lashed the whip and roared: "What's the matter with you, you 'god-damn little *crab*? Shove off, will you!" Alice whined a bit but stood firm, her hoofs sturdily clamped to the road.

Griffiths was the more surprised because so far on the round she had been docile and obedient enough, trotting quite eager from one street to another. The lay of the vale was as familiar to her as it was to P.C. Dai Daniels, now standing on the corner with a cynical grin on his blue jaw. At last, when Griffiths's face was getting red as boiling beet-root, Dai strolled over and said officially:

"She won't budge till she's had her pint."

"What!" spluttered Griffiths.

"Her pint of beer. She's been used to it for five years now, to my knowledge. Evans Cockles was always stopping here for a pint for himself and a pint for Alice, all the year round."

Griffiths exploded, for he was neither a generous man nor much of a drinker. Whip in hand, he attacked Alice with bitter venom, until P.C. Dai trumpeted warningly: "Hold on now! Stop. A donkey's got feelings same as the rest of us." Griffiths took the hint. All the time Alice's hoofs hadn't budged, though she vigorously shook her head up and down as if in astonished protest against all this fuss over a pint of beer.

There was nothing else for Griffiths to do but go in the Rose and Crown for Alice's pint, which was poured into a flat earthenware bowl kept specially for her.

Alice, with Griffiths holding the bowl, drew the beer up gratefully, her middle-aged grey lips content in the rich liquid. Griffiths was cursing about this expense to each business day, for the Rose and Crown couldn't be avoided on his round.

But Alice's big silver ears closed and opened in shivering delight while she drank. She had another trick too. The beer finished, she lifted her head high, set back her lips and, displaying all her teeth, gave a long, gurgling laugh. Griffiths started back in astonishment from the laugh. He gazed at Alice with sobered dread now.

She, briskly shaking her body, was ready to begin business again. And during the rest of the round she trotted the streets

with stylish niceness, stopping prompt at customers' doors and taking corners tidily and undirected. On her way back from the top of the vale she never stopped at the Rose and Crown. It was afternoon closing time by then, anyhow.

"The old donkey that I had in Pontypridd," Griffiths grumbled, however, "was teetotal as a Baptist minister and never laughed from one Christmas to another."

It did not seem proper that a donkey should be so intelligent. What next would Alice do? Yet in everything else she was an orderly example to all workers. Let Griffiths, on starting the round, load the cart as much as he liked, she never staggered. There was her pint to look forward to half-way up the vale and, after it, there was the abiding tonic power the beer gave. Alice asked no more of life.

Little did she know that, though she had triumphed over her new owner, another threat to her bit of pleasure was brewing.

It was a time when the vale was filling up with new houses, and to one of these came Mrs. Maud James. She was a woman who Spoke and a great one for organising meetings against this and that, which she did very well, being herself very public-looking and with a deep, stern voice. She called herself a lover of animals, was strict teetotal, wore big furs, and usually a pheasant's feather stuck up like a sword from her hat.

One day she was passing the Rose and Crown while Alice was about to enjoy her beer. Griffiths, who by now had come to accept this little interlude in the day's business and even took a half pint himself, was just carrying the bowl out. Mrs. James stopped short. Her nostrils twitched. She peered into the bowl.

"Surely," she boomed, "you're not giving that poor animal *beer*!" Griffiths nodded. Mrs. James swelled. "What a scandal! Doing it for fun, I suppose. You disgusting man," she said severely, "are you intoxicated yourself? That donkey needs water. It's a shame he should be taken advantage of——"

"Alice is a lady, ma'am——" Griffiths began, stopping on the kerb.

"That makes it worse if anything," declared Mrs. James, flushing. She worked herself up indignantly. "Look here, if you don't stop this I'll report you to the——"

Alice stretched her head to them and gave a loud neigh of impatience, her eyes devouring the withheld bowl.

"Budge from here," Griffiths was trying to explain, "she won't without her beer."

"Nonsense. I never heard of such a thing. It's you drunkards of men, not satisfied with intoxicating yourselves, but you want to make the very beasts resemble you." Now she was well away on one of her favourite themes. The feather in her hat quivered in fury. "Do you starve that poor animal? It looks bony enough. Just as drunkards starve their poor wives and children——"

"Here," Griffiths began to growl, "put a brake on it. Who's blooming moke is this. . . . All right, Alice, my girl, I'm coming." For there were pitiable neighs now.

Mrs. James refused to be silenced, and by now a few people had gathered round. While Alice thirstily drew up the all-too-brief pint, she appealed to them: "Don't you agree this is a scandal? Intoxicating a poor animal——"

Alice, perhaps attracted by Mrs. James's fur, lifted up her head from the emptied bowl and swerved it quite near the woman. Her lips pulled back, she uttered that long, gurgling laugh up and down the stretch of her neck. And all her grey belly shook, and her high, pointed silver ears quivered.

Mrs. James started back from that strange, antique laugh, with its wild echoes of champing teeth, rubbed tough sinews, and clashing bones. Besides, those evilly gaunt teeth were dangerously near. The little knot of people had tittered.

"There!" said Griffiths. "See what Alice thinks of your teetotal ideas?"

But, undaunted, Mrs. James's anger was renewed. She filled her lungs, heaved, and let loose: "It's wicked. As I thought, you give this wretched beast drink to get fun out of it. You probably do not water it, so that it's obliged to drink anything. *I know.* This has been a most disgusting sight. I shall report you. Your cart looks overloaded to me too. It's not enough to make this creature a beast of burden but you'd make it into a sot too——"

Alice suddenly dropped a steaming load.

"—yes, a sot," heaved Mrs. James. "It's the most scandalous ——" But the burst of laughter which came from the people discomposed her at last. She began to back away, not without various threats, however.

Alice began to give sundry indications that she wished to resume the day's business now. Her soft, gleaming eyes looked

round enquiringly. She stamped a hoof. Briskly she whisked her tail in the steam.

Someone in the crowd remarked: "Seems that Alice has got a back answer for everything, same as all her crew."

Tomorrow

"TODAY!" smiled Miss Sadler, stopping a moment to touch the oak tree's bark, "today!"

At her approach two jays had fled in sharp-edged brilliance to a wild cherry tree up the glade. She looked at them in affection. This was a haunt of jays, as it was of hers, and they had known each other for long: she did not share the country people's hatred for these thieving beauties of orchard and garden, she only knew them as gay-plumaged witnesses of her daily happiness. "Vermin," the hard worked landlady of the Loaded Shovel would curse them, making Miss Sadler flutter her slight, exquisitely-kept hands in deprecation.

She strode on down the wide lane, in her spick-and-span brogues and suit of fine greenish tweeds, an unnecessary walking-stick in hand. A country-living lady abounding with rhythmical health. Hatless, her vivid silver-spun mass of hair sprang clean as the sunshine; there was a steady light, fresh and optimistic, in her grey eyes—eyes that were arrestingly, piercingly clear. When she came to another oak—the one near the old inn drowsing inside its rose-red garden—she touched that too with her finger-tips. And said: "Today!"

On the garden lawn in front of the Loaded Shovel a lean middle-aged woman was spreading a washed quilt over a chair, to catch the afternoon sun. She replied to Miss Sadler's greeting glumly; she had the manner of a woman who toils ceaselessly in her house and finds little reward. For her the 'picturesque' inn, visited only erratically by motorists and hikers, was a place of draughty chimneys, beetle-infested floors, and black-beamed low ceilings conducive to bad temper.

"And how is your mother today?" Miss Sadler sang, in such a manner that surely any physical ailment must seem bearable on such a hopeful day as this.

"Oh, just the same," replied Mrs. Leach, still grudging.

Miss Sadler glanced at her watch. "Would you like me to run up to see her? I've just a few minutes to spare."

But Mrs. Leach made an excuse. Her mother was sleeping, and if she was woken she would fret for this and that, and grumble, and be restless. The daughter's voice trailed away irritably. Perhaps she was ashamed of what she had been obliged to do to her mother. For two years the old lady, aged seventy-eight, had been securely tied to her bed with ropes.

"Oh well, never mind," said Miss Sadler. And it was as if she forced a little of the radiance out of her face. "You mustn't take it to heart too much, Mrs. Leach. Your mother has had a long and useful life, hasn't she?" Then, without pause, she said: "I'm expecting my fiancé with the five-fifteen train today."

"Oh yes?" said Mrs. Leach, uninterested. Her eye was on her husband, who had come out of a shed beyond the garden gate with a wire cage dangling from his hand. "Have you caught one?" she called, a half-scolding, half-whining note in her voice now. Mr. Leach came towards them. A live rat, large but petrified, crouched in the cage. Miss Sadler gave a little cry. But Mrs. Leach began to bristle into ferocity, exclaiming as she peered: "The devil. . . . That snout! I'll give you snout." Peculiarly and obsessively mad, she shook her fist at the terrified beast huddled in the corner of the cage, and turned to the shrinking Miss Sadler: "I saw it with my own eyes one night, there was a full moon, I saw it walking on its hind legs out of the hen-coop holding up an egg in its front paws, for all the world like a child with a balloon!"

"Perhaps it wasn't this one," said her husband. He was a rather disconsolate-faced man who suggested an obstinate stupidity which perhaps was due to a need for retaliation, and also to an indefinable kindliness if only he was allowed to be kind. Something had gone wrong in his relationship with the world. His wife said he was bone-lazy; in her milder moments she said this was due to 'his funny glands'.

"I *recognise* that rat," she exclaimed. "Besides, it *looks* guilty. . . . . Where's Pete?" She looked round for their young dog. "Pete, Pete!" she shouted. "Where's he gone? Never here when he's wanted."

"Best drown it," said Mr. Leach uncertainly. He himself seemed to be crouching a little from his wife's wrath.

"*Drown it!* Pete must have it. He must get a taste of them." She looked in sudden withering contempt at her husband. "Anybody would think you'd like to make a pet of the brute. You look ashamed of yourself for catching it——"

Yet she too was at heart a kindly woman, and when there was woe in a village family she was the first to rush up with aid and sympathy. Miss Sadler drew away, unobtrusively, tactfully, and resumed her two-mile walk to the railway station, stepping out with decision, and observantly, those clear and steady eyes missing nothing. She knew every tree and bush, almost every stone, in the lane. And, once again, she stopped to touch a young oak growing beside a field gate: and, smiling, said aloud: "Today!" The air smelt of meadow-sweet, clover and sun. In a field of wheat myriads of poppies drew a silkily taut strength out of the sun's splendour, each flower burning erect. The silver afternoon sparkled; the wheat ears stood packed with their fine-spun fruit.

There was time to call at Bill Tanner's tumbledown cottage, just off the lane. She wanted to give Mrs. Tanner a little box of glass beads for her crippled young daughter. The poor child's left leg had a tubercular disease. Mrs. Tanner, a tough woman with a philosophic manner, accepted the box, as she had accepted all the other compassionate gifts, with her usual stolidity. There seemed no need at all for Miss Sadler's tender note of sympathy as she asked about Phyllis's state today.

"She's been behaving very annoyed and cross," said Mrs. Tanner. "Threw her crutch at her Dad after dinner."

"Oh dear, oh dear," Miss Sadler fluttered, "how trying for you! . . . Never mind, my dear," she comforted simply, woman to woman, and classless in distress. And at the cottage door she couldn't help saying, so eager was her wish to share her delight: "My fiancé is arriving with the five-fifteen today." Mrs. Tanner said nothing, and the visitor hastened away among the fruit trees, helplessly dazzled in her perhaps undeserved contentment.

It was as if with such calls as these she wanted to do penance for enjoying such luck. Luck of purse and heart. There were days when she would make detours to other houses stricken by some calamity or other.

Although there was plenty of time left, her pace increased as she entered the miniature town. She passed swiftly through the main street of friendly little shops, genteel cafés, smartened

geranium-hung residential inn and busy garage; she nodded formally to some vague acquaintances, smiled fully at other passers-by. Among the shoppers and visitors she was outstanding with her youngly joyous face and curly silver mass of hair. Her cheerfulness was so straightforward, clear cut, and not to be hampered by doubts. But also it was controlled: it gave her a poise which did not jar on other people. Anyone could see that Miss Sadler was held in liking and respect.

The railway station, which smelt of fish and wallflowers, served several villages; three buses waited empty in the yard. She had many minutes to spare, but, with a smile at the young porter, she passed briskly on to the empty platform and sat on a bench. There, alone in the purring sunshine, she began to assume the private look of a woman who is shut into a completely tranquil dream which she savours in serene isolation. A woman with such orderly inner resources of strength that she could concentrate on a reverie for long periods without a single distracting movement.

The click of the signal roused her. The porter strolled to the platform, followed by a hot, perspiring woman wearing, remarkably, a bulky fur coat—oh, what strange things people did!—and who was tugged by an annoyed-looking dog on a lead. The porter patted the dog, and the woman exclaimed, panting but voluble: "You wouldn't think he had a serious operation a fortnight ago, would you? . . . For gall-stones!" she cried, quite triumphantly. "Now he's strong as a wolf again, but I expect he thinks I'm taking him to the dog's hospital for another . . . Bruce! Bruce! Lovey! Don't be frightened. . . ."

Miss Sadler too gazed triumphantly at the dog that had come successfully through such tribulation. And the dog's attention was suddenly arrested by the silver-haired woman's clear, steady gaze; perfectly still, he looked back into her eyes intently for a moment—and then gave a low, sullen growl, slackening the lead as he backed.

"Bruce, Bruce, now then!" his mistress scolded. To Miss Sadler she explained: "He's all right, really. But he's had a serious operation, and perhaps he thinks you're the nurse at the hospital—she had hair just like yours." The dog growled more menacingly when Miss Sadler, oblivious to him now, rose from the bench. The train was bustling round the bend.

She took up a position near the platform barrier. Doors

swung back, slammed again. Oh, what a lot of people returning today! Most of them glanced at her as they passed through the gate: her own gaze skimmed over them swift as a clear-flying bird. A man greeted the fur-coated woman with a rough kiss. The porter stood collecting tickets at the barrier. The train began to glide from the emptying platform.

Away down the stone length a man carrying a portfolio, a town black hat and a neatly folded newspaper walked leisurely, almost tiredly, towards her. The last passenger. Youngish and darkly elegant, he seemed preoccupied, the decisive business-man's manner relaxed. There was even a fugitive suggestion of a sleepwalker in his unemphatic gait; the narrow face, pale and tired, seemed unaware. She took one step forward, a brief instinctive pace, those grey untroubled eyes full on him.

He passed her. His head bent slightly, the oblique glance he gave her seemed to hold a veiled sorrow. He went through the gate, passed into the shadows cast by the overhanging roof of the booking-hall, and vanished into the bright sunlight of the road beyond. She did not turn.

She stood there for some seconds. A petal of deep colour burned on either cheek. But otherwise she might have been a woman who was plunged into calmly puzzled thought, lightly frowning over a missed appointment. Then, her fingers gripping the stick sharply, she turned and walked out of the station as briskly as she had arrived. The young porter touched his cap to her.

She smiled at him with her quick, benevolent, feudal smile.

Mrs. Hathaway was always glad to see Miss Sadler, and this evening she felt in a particularly affable mood. There was something winking, even sly, in her round, hen-black eye. But her moods, like her physical condition, were incalculable. During Miss Sadler's last visit she had angrily demanded her to untie the ropes so that she could go down to the bar to "see what was going on in the damn world." This evening she seemed to have no objection to the four lengths fixed to her ankles and wrists and tied to the bed-posts. There was just enough latitude of rope to allow her full movement in the huge feather bed, and not an inch beyond it.

"I've brought you a bag of chocolate-creams," Miss Sadler said.

The old lady gave an anticipatory gurgle, like a chuckle. "Ah, my dear, you're a kind girl. I often tell Delia, if there were more lassies in the world like Miss Sadler. . . . Who's the noisy bunch out on the lawn?" she demanded. "They sound cheap. There's a girl with a laugh like a mare's."

"They're very smartly dressed," said Miss Sadler, putting a chocolate into the old lady's mouth, "and they've got a lovely car. I think one of the young ladies has taken that new house above Fox's Gap." She sat down close to the bed. With that benign quality of being a nurse to a whole race, she seemed not to mind the oppressive odour of a bed never left to air, or the rankly-hot sixteenth-century room with the lattice always resolutely closed.

"It's time there were some well-off customers," champed Mrs. Hathaway. "Trade's been shocking all the summer. Poor Delia, she keeps on worrying, but I say to her: 'Well, what if you were tied to a bed like me?—count your blessings, drat you, even if that dried-up crow of a man you married isn't one of them'." She could be a rude, and even bawdy, old woman, and she hated her son-in-law.

"I've been to the station," Miss Sadler said. "I expected my fiancé with the five-fifteen, but he didn't catch it after all."

"Ah! . . . Expect he's been kept busy in town." Mrs. Hathaway swallowed the chocolate-cream with a gurgle. "One of these days you *must* bring your young man to see me. . . . I'll tell him," she proclaimed, "I'll tell him what a treasure he's got. . . . I bet," she began to smoulder, "he won't turn out like that lump my Delia married." She peeped conspiratorially at the visitor. "Proud as a turkey-cock, I'll go bail on that, *and* a sweet gentleman?" She sounded enticing, saying this, coaxing. "Handsome enough, I'll be bound, to warm up even my old innards?"

"Anthony *is* attractive," admitted Miss Sadler, a little deprecatingly, since in her milieu male good looks were not dwelt upon.

"Tell me, tell me," egged the old lady. "I like to hear of 'em still going on in the world. . . . Does he kiss nice?" she dared.

Miss Sadler ignored the direct question, yet seemed very willing to proceed with the subject. Her delicately restless white hands, harmonious in their movements, made graphic gestures as she talked, the gestures of a woman imaginatively living her recital. The sapphire of her engagement ring caught the peach-red gleams of sunshine piercing the window.

"He's quite tall, and walks so nicely . . . unhurried but with a lively little spring in his step. . . . But I like his voice best," she smiled, clasping her nervous fingers, unclasping them; "it's so low and sweet and *real*; he speaks like . . . like a young man who's at peace with himself."

The old lady gave a full chuckle, like a duck's; her sly eye definitely winked; the fat body heaved. "Ah, I *know*, my dear. I do like a voice that makes one itch like that! . . . At night, in the dark, whatever the rest of 'em is like, the way they say it counts more than anything—you see if it don't!"

Miss Sadler actually blushed, the pink face incongruously young under the silver but vital hair. But still she did not seem really distressed, and she resumed her own train of thought: "And no one can carry an umbrella just like he does. . . . Open or closed," she laughed tinklingly. "I love sharing his umbrella, I could walk for miles in the pouring rain with him."

"You're lucky, dear," judged the old lady, in a profound tone, "you can take pleasure in things. . . . Bah," she began to smoulder again, "*you*'ll never turn sour: I can tell. And that's saying something." The ankle ropes were tugged tight, as if she vindictively clapped her feet together under the quilt.

"But all people change. Sometimes I wonder if in middle age Anthony won't show some sort of failing: he seems almost too perfect." But, as if she couldn't really believe them, she smiled at her qualms.

"Don't worry about it now, my dear," warbled Mrs. Hathaway. "Enjoy yourself, enjoy yourself while the going's good. When I was courting I used to love it when my bloke had a belly-ache, I *loved* his belly-ache, and when he had a nasty boil on his neck."

"Oh, I am enjoying myself tremendously. And Anthony is always so cheerful himself, such a high-spirited disposition. . . . He's doing very well in his work," she added, nodding like a woman outside the mysteries of business but confidently aware of success in it. "He is to be junior partner soon."

"What business is it?" asked the old lady, promptly inquisitive.

"Spices." Miss Sadler laughed. "He smells a little of cinnamon sometimes, it's quite delightful. And he never catches a cold—they say that working in a spices warehouse keeps one free of colds."

Their conversation had the sound of following a familiar routine. Mrs. Hathaway's questions and remarks seemed expected, like the visitor's readiness to dwell on her lover's advantages: they were like confederates enclosed in a circle of secret understanding. The sly bed-imprisoned old lady, feeding tirelessly on the other's pouring out of her enchantment, went on asking highly personal questions to which Miss Sadler replied with a ready but decent eagerness. On the lawn below, younger and crisper voices laughed in holiday carelessness, though there was one feminine voice that was discordant as a peacock's—"No class *there*," Mrs. Hathaway paused to remark. "Sounds as if she's getting tipsy."

"Just pop another chocolate-cream in my mouth, will you dear?" This done, the old lady resumed effortlessly: "It does me good to see a girl in love full-strength with her sweetheart. Nowadays half of them seem to begrudge a man his right to 'em. . . . . Not that some of the women hasn't cause," she heaved again, tugging the ropes taut.

"Oh, why *do* so many marriages go wrong?" Miss Sadler looked blank in the mystery, as though never, never would she understand it.

"Count the pebbles on the shore," grinned Mrs. Hathaway. But her visitor, the grandfather clock below the stairs striking seven, rose with surprising abruptness and flurry. "Come to see me soon again. I do enjoy hearing about your young man." She accepted the sudden haste without remark. "You're a comfort to me," she said, but sank oppressed into the bed as if deflated.

"I must go at once," exclaimed Miss Sadler. "Oh, dear!" And she stopped a moment to smile down benevolently on the corpulent old lady who had been bound so drastically to her bed for two years. Alive and strong, with her unquenched face, she patted the old lady's dropsical shoulder with something like gratitude. "I enjoy talking about him too: thank you for listening. But I shall be locked out!" Miss Sadler laughed, running to the door.

Mrs. Leach, dressed for the evening session, and standing by the table with a bottle of gin in her hand, called out a farewell to her. Miss Sadler hurriedly waved a hand in return, passed into the lane, and strode alertly upwards.

"Who *is* that, Mrs. Leach? I've seen her before."

The four customers, two young women and two young men, had paused to look at the woman who passed, so handsomely self-contained, across the lawn: instinctively their voices had fallen silent. In their coloured linen trousers and sports shirts, which both sexes wore, they gave a centre rainbow splash to the lawn. Though it was difficult to tell which was married to which, so hilariously gregarious were they, Mrs. Leach knew that the young lady who asked the question was Mrs. Lambert, the newcomer to the district; she had been down so often from Fox's Gap to fetch bottles of gin and rum.

"That," said Mrs. Leach readily, "is Miss Sadler. She's up at The Towers."

Mrs. Lambert jerked her head aside, swinging her deep gold hair, and she stared with careful inscrutability at a rose-bush: something unacceptable to her might have been mentioned. The young woman they called Judy—she too wore a wire-thin wedding-ring—remarked. "What wonderful hair she has."

"They say," said Mrs. Leach, "it turned white in a month. When she was twenty-five. She must be about sixty now."

"Surely not?" the plump young man idly said, snapping his fingers at Pete, who, playful after his meal of rat, was running round the lawn as if in pursuit of a dream one. "Her face is quite young."

Mrs. Leach, casually and entirely without compassion, said: "She goes to the railway station every day to meet the five-fifteen train. She goes to meet her fiancé, as she calls him."

"And he's never there?" said Judy, bright and light-lipped as a brittle pink columbine.

Mrs. Leach nodded, and went on baldly: "She used to live over at Britwell, seven or eight miles from here. Her young man lived in that part too. He used to travel to the City every morning. . . . Then one week he had to go to the North of England on business, and the day he was due back he was supposed to arrive with that five-fifteen train——" As though he wanted to cut off this bleak recital, the slight nervous young man—he looked like a bruised faun—held up his glass for another gin, and Mrs. Leach, still holding the bottle as if in prudence, poured into a brass measure. Mrs. Lambert frowned, and at last Mrs. Leach decided he was her husband.

"And the fiancé wasn't on the five-fifteen?" said Judy, in her quick, experienced voice. "Had he jilted her, eloped with someone else? His typist?"

Mrs. Leach shook her head. "No. . . . There had been a terrible accident to the train he was travelling in from the North: a lot of people were killed. Miss Sadler waited for the next train after that five-fifteen one, and then the next two, till at last the station-master got news of the accident up North and mentioned it to her on the platform."

Mrs. Lambert looked about her uncertainly: she seemed bored and ready to go. She shivered in her thin shirt: a little evening breeze had sprung up under the sun's last scarlet. "Her young man was killed?" she said in a concise way, adding: "Well, she must have been an unbalanced woman before that."

"Or far too much in love with him?" Judy said, and looked at Mrs. Leach encouragingly.

"No doubt," said Mrs. Leach. "But, you see, it wasn't only the shock of his being killed." She paused again, but dramatically now, so that even Mrs. Lambert sat back. "It was when his remains didn't turn up that she became like she is. . . . There was a muddle. The coffin was supposed to arrive a few days after the accident, and by that same train, the five-fifteen: it was going to be buried the next morning in St. John's Church up there on the hill. They say Miss Sadler intended to sit up all night with the corpse, and no one could stop her going to meet the coffin on that train; she was there with a bunch of snowdrops—it was February, you see. But there was that awful muddle, and there was no coffin . . . not with that train or the next . . . not ever!" At this Mrs. Leach lifted her face with some pride: the story might have been her own.

"Oh . . . why?" asked the plump young man, idly scratching his sunburnt arm, freckled like butcher's brawn.

"Well, you see, what they had thought was Miss Sadler's young man wasn't him—someone else had claimed the remains. Nothing arrived for Miss Sadler to weep over all night; she was left quite alone, as you might say."

Mrs. Leach had told the tale in the Loaded Shovel several times before: she had even come to look upon Miss Sadler as a valuable possession of the district—and even, obscurely, a woman to be envied. . . . As she finished, Judy dropped her

head with a sigh on the plump young man's shoulder, and he grinned down on her with the beautiful exhibitionary fatuity of early bliss: they looked as if they could linger for hours in the evening garden among the roses and the damson trees.

But Mrs. Lambert got up with a jerk from the table. "She looked happy enough," she commented. "Come on, you two: that chicken's got to be put in the oven." The worn faun-like young man jumped and suddenly gave vent to a shrill, sexless, bodiless laugh: it was the laugh Mrs. Hathaway had commented on upstairs. "They're both coots," he yelped; "drunken crazies." His odd skin-tight little face was squeezed up with something like fury. He fled light as a zephyr across the lawn, leapt into the car with a squirrel's jump, and sat there bolt upright peering out of his slitted eye-sockets, like an animal in a cage.

Mrs. Leach ignored the interruption. Taking a pound note from Mrs. Lambert, she said: "Oh yes, Miss Sadler is quite happy. She's well off they say, and after her parents died she went to live in The Towers, and they all love her there. We get the nurses in here sometimes. It's a wonderfully comfortable place, from all accounts, everything modern, and the best attention for people like her."

She did indeed seem undisturbedly content as she walked with such a quick and steady rhythm past the glade where the jays flew in sharp brilliance. In the high distance beyond the trees could be seen, ethereally palatial as a fairy-tale castle against the sunset, a close-packed Gothic pile of turrets, dark towers and spires. There were three wayside oaks in the mile to the gates, and Miss Sadler touched each one with her finger-tips, and with each touch she said: "Tomorrow."

Resurrection

HALF A DAY BEFORE THE LID was to be screwed down on her, Meg rose in her coffin and faintly asked for a glass of water. Her two sisters were bustling about the room, tidying and dusting and

admiring the flowers, and both, after a few moments of terrified shock, looked at the recently deceased with a bitter anger. Once again she was doing something improper.

"Water!" stuttered Bertha. "Go on with you now. What you want with water?" Gathering strength at the sound of her own voice, she went on sternly and as if speaking to a nuisance: "Lie back thee, lie back. Dead you are."

"Yes, indeed," breathed Ellen, "dead these four days, and the mourning ordered."

Meg, nice in a new shiny white satin nightdress, trimmed with lace, stared back. But her gaze still had something of the marbled hardness of the dead. There seemed an awful weariness in the hang of her head. Her shoulders gave little clutching jumps. Suddenly she lay back in her coffin, sighing, and without further speech.

"Ha!" cried Bertha, in relief, "a bit of life there was left in her nerves and made her body rise up like that. Funny thing! Just like some chickens run round the yard after you've chopped off their heads." She sat down and her face was eased again. "But a nasty turn it gave me, Ellen. Just like her it would have been, to do a trick on us, making us spend money on mourning and that five-guinea coffin."

"Yes, indeed," cried Ellen, her face still very grey from retreating hysteria, but relieved too, "and eighty-five coming to the funeral tomorrow and an announcement in the newspaper." She turned her head away from the coffin. "A fine disgrace it would have been for us."

And both sisters thought of the hours that must elapse before the undertaker arrived that afternoon safely to shut up the coffin. Meg might rise again and frighten them with a bit of second-hand life. Why, the next time something awful might happen—perhaps she would be jolted back entirely into the land of the living.

"He won't come till five o'clock," said Bertha. "He's busy burying Samson Lewis this afternoon."

"Can't we screw the lid down ourselves?" Ellen quavered. "Not right, is it, for us to have shocks like this. My heart's going pitapat."

"Talk there might be if we shut her up before the time arranged" Bertha answered, shaking her head. "People will say we was in

a hurry. You know," she reminded her sister, "that two or three are coming at tea-time to mourn with us while the job is being done."

"Oh!" exclaimed Ellen, remembering at this, "I didn't buy the cold ham at the shop this morning."

"Sardines," said Bertha definitely, reverting to a debate of that morning, "will be enough, I tell you again. On toast. You can't give cold ham today *and* tomorrow."

"When Ceinwen Roberts was buried," Ellen, who was not quite so mean as Bertha, remarked, "they had baron of beef, leg of pork, and veal pie. *One* meat is not enough for tomorrow, Bertha. Those there are who don't like cold ham."

"Then the tinned salmon they must have," Bertha grumbled. "Haven't we spent enough on clothes! Twelve pound fifteen in the draper's. No one can say we've stinted decent burial for her."

"Most of it," said Ellen, with sudden sisterly sourness, "on our backs." Occasionally the sisters quarrelled.

"If *we* had died," Bertha brooded, "as cheap as possible *she'd* have put us away."

"Well," Ellen said, in the manner of one generously overlooking a fault, "she was never a one to enjoy a funeral."

"No," continued Bertha, with a surprising depth of bitterness, "men and whisky was *her* bent."

"Hush, Bertha, hush. So many years ago that was."

"Ha, craving she had for them always. If she hadn't been obliged to take to her bed and lie there helpless, she'd have been out in the world disgracing herself and us to her dying day."

"Well," soothed Ellen, "safe she is now."

But they both glanced apprehensively towards the coffin. Bleak and raddled and wintry, the sisters, who were in the fifties, pursed their lips. They were twins. Both wore a piled-up mass of coarse, dour hair in which were jabbed small combs and tortoise-shell prongs. Their faces were puckered in, secretive, and proud. In chapel and street they liked to swank: they liked people to think they were well off and to treat them with ceremony. They were daughters of a semi-successful builder, and in a hole behind some loose bricks in the cellar was the money he had made, for he had trusted no bank; his daughters thought likewise. A widower, he had died five years ago, and since then no event of importance had happened to the twins. But now the

maladies of their younger sister Meg had culminated in a death too long delayed. They had looked on her as their cross. But they told themselves that they loved her, and indeed sometimes they had brought her a baked apple with clotted cream, her favourite, and showed affection. On the day she had lain back and stiffened, they thought it was for the best, all things considered. They began to fluff and preen themselves, for death is important and brings ceremony, display, and a great going out into public.

"She," Ellen had wept at intervals, "wasn't bad now and again, our poor Meg. After all, she didn't ought to have gone so young."

"No," agreed Bertha, who at intervals had been gloomy too, "she didn't ought to have gone before she tried to tidy up her life a bit. But now it's happened——"

"Yes," said Ellen, "yes indeed."

And after an hour or so of indulgence in the magic of grief they would bestir themselves, realising that a rare opportunity had come to them. Like royalty, they would ride in a procession for two miles to the cemetery, at every corner between the rows of houses knots of people gathered, craning their heads to see.

Then, again, it seemed they were to be thwarted. An hour or so later in that afternoon Meg sat up once more and peered round with dreadful stare, her white lips pulled back and showing her naked gums—for the sisters had removed her ten-guinea set of false teeth. And again she murmured for water. Ellen was alone in the room, Bertha having gone downstairs to prepare the food for the visitors; and realising this time that something remarkable had happened to the deceased, she tottered to the door and shrieked for her sister. Bertha came bustling upstairs, a half-cut loaf still clutched in her hand. "What now, what now?" she, demanded, her suspicious fury ready.

"Come back again she has, asking for water," moaned Ellen. And she added despairingly, "Not dead at all is she."

"Rubbish now, rubbish." Bertha stood in the doorway like a snorting roused mare. "Hasn't the doctor signed the certificate? Dead he said she was." But there, undoubtedly, was the starkly up-raised Meg, now looking round with vague and pathetic appeal. "But if not dead she is," breathed Bertha further, "damages the doctor will have to pay us. Close on twenty pounds," she suddenly screamed in shrill hysteria towards the menacing body, "have we spent on you."

The sisters advanced together towards the coffin, creeping, but angry now.

"Lie back," Ellen also began shouting in the wrath of despair, "lie back. Your funeral is tomorrow. At half-past two. Eighty-five are coming."

Bertha laid her hand restrainingly on Ellen's bristling arm. She began to speak in a cunningly entreating voice, coaxing. "Go you back, Meg, only half alive you'll be indeed if you don't. Not fit to live you are with your bladder and kidneys. And what if we go before you, who'll look after you then? The workhouse it'll be. Not worth living is life, Meg fach. A dirty business it is. Black is the future. Go you now, please, and follow soon we will, true enough. Better company in the other world than this."

"Five guineas for your coffin alone!" Ellen took the coaxing cue from her sister, but added a whine to her voice. "Look you how lovely it is. Polished oak. Die now, there's a nice girl, die now."

But Meg's whitish eyes were fixed on the loaf of bread that was clutched in Bertha's hand; their dullness passed into a greedy gleam.

"Bread," she mumbled, "bread." And with a pleased sigh she eagerly stretched forth her trembling hands.

Wholly convinced at last, the sisters cried out in fury and horror. The clamour brought neighbours running into the house. The foaming and stuttering twins were attended to by sympathetic women, while others stood in awe round the coffin. None attempted to lift the weak Meg out of her coffin or supply her with the refreshment she craved. Mrs. Williams, a strident and dominant woman, took charge and declared that a policeman must be informed before anything could be done. After some delay P.C. Johns appeared downstairs and in a stern, disapproving voice asked:

"What's this I hear about a corpse coming to life, Bertha Evans?"

"It's upstairs," quavered Bertha. But at sight of the policeman she began to bounce back into energy, aware of the drama that was being offered her.

The policeman tramped heavily upstairs. Ellen had recovered some while before and was repeating over and over again how Meg had sat up twice. Exhausted with her futile demands for refreshment, Meg was now lying back amid the pleated mauve

satin folds. There was no doubt, however, that life was flushing back into her features. The policeman gazed at her in the suspicious and convicting manner of his kind. At sight of him Meg gave a slight whimper, as if frightened. At one time in her young and gay days she had been arrested for drunkenness.

"A doctor must see her," declared P. C. Johns, after ten minutes' cogitation. "Nothing for me is there here." And sullenly he went away.

After further delay and searching the doctor was found. It was now late evening and still Meg had not been removed from the coffin. As the news spread, people kept on trooping into the house from near and far. Bertha and Ellen, recovered, were the centre of much enquiry. Sympathy was lavished on them. What would be done with the black clothes now, and the coffin? And no ride to the cemetery tomorrow. Someone suggested that they should take a week at the seaside as recompense. Dr. Miskin himself, befuddled with whisky, as usual, glared at Meg so angrily that onlookers thought he was going to strike her. For a few moments he would not believe that she was living; he roughly pushed one of her already blinking eyelids up and down, prodded her, and spitefully gripped her limp wrist. Finally, he declared her living, told Bertha that in England such things often happened, and left instructions that Meg was to receive only milk and water for three days; he spoke as if she deserved such punishment. Bertha looked back at him malevolently.

"Dead you said she was and signed certificate. Damages I ask you. What we've spent on mourning and the oak coffin. The food for the funeral tea tomorrow I leave out."

The doctor spat and left the house. Bertha and Ellen began to weep in rage, several women loosened their tears, too, in sympathy. The undertaker, sweating in his haste, arrived and declared that contract had been made for the funeral tomorrow—he would keep it, and at two o'clock the hearse and carriages would be outside the house; no business of his was it if the corpse was not in the coffin. He was very agitated and spoke wildly; trade had been bad all winter. Bertha and Ellen, already incensed by the doctor, screamed and threatened until he went flying down the stairs. At the front door he turned and shouted back:

"On your hands the coffin will be, however. Made for you it was and I will not take it back now."

Bertha and Ellen had to admit defeat. A neighbour consoled them by saying that the coffin could be kept under a bed until required and would make a good cupboard for blankets and suchlike.

Then once again Meg rose stark from her narrow bed and began whimpering.

"A bit of brandy," she begged. "And give me my teeth back, please, now."

Bertha and Ellen looked at each other numbly. The teeth had already been sold to the pawnbroker, but this they did not want to admit before the neighbours. They went over to their sister and laid her back in the coffin.

"Hush now, Meg fach. Rest, be quiet, take time. The pump in your heart is not working proper yet. Soon it will be."

"My teeth," whispered Meg, "give me my teeth——"

The twins were saved further explanation by the arrival of a reporter from the newspaper, Tommy Thomas, a frowning but brisk young man. After glancing at Meg, he took out his notebook and asked for particulars.

Bertha and Ellen began speaking together. Excitement shone from their eyes now Never had they been in the newspapers. When Tommy asked for a photograph of Meg, Bertha declared flatly:

"No photo is there of her. But one of Ellen and myself I will give you, taken in Swansea."

Tommy sucked his pencil. He asked the sisters if they had any special comment to make on the event. Bertha's sense of grievance again got the upper hand and she answered bitterly:

"Yes, indeed. This now. What she want to come back for? A fathead she was always. In life nightmares she was always having. Peace she had a chance of. Back she is now, the fool, where a lot of worries bit at her like a plague of evil rats. Fathead twice over. *That* put in your paper, young man, and let a bit of truth be told for once. Now then, Ellen, fetch the photo."

In her coffin Meg still whimpered, as if in weary distress. When all the visitors had gone, weakly she managed to lift her head yet again. She asked to be taken out of the coffin. The twins pursed their lips; both, now that the excitement of the drama was over, felt flat, as if something had been filched from them. Ellen looked

dangerously vexed. Bertha approached the coffin and said maliciously:

"What for you want to get out? Not many people is it get a chance to spend a night in a coffin. Comfortable it is surely? Clean and dry as the inside of a nut. You stay there, Meg. Stripped your bed is, and no sheets aired. And too weak you are to be shifted. Yes, indeed. Tomorrow we'll lift you out, yes, perhaps. Settle down now and rest . . ."

The Foolish One

I

THAT SUMMER SHE WOULD SIT DAY AFTER DAY at the open lattice, her eyelids blue, her mouth scarlet, her bay-copper hair dazzlingly burnished, and wait in a dreamy reverie for the dusk. The occasional drivers who noticed her always glanced twice at that face in the cottage window above the pretty garden opening unexpectedly beside this lonely road, with the beech-woods closing round again. From the road the painted face had a remote and even rather stupid look of vacancy, doll-like. It never seemed to return a glance.

Johanna often did sink into a mysterious open-eyed stupor. The sunshine was hot and perpetual that summer. For two or three hours before sitting at the window she amused herself washing in lotions, making up, arranging her beautiful hair in different styles, and admiring the handsome contours of her breasts, which, while she uttered a delighted little whinny, she would caress and pinch at the nipples. But all this used up so little of the long, silent afternoons. They never seemed to end.

Only that summer had she vaguely begun to realise that her life was becoming vexatious.

After her husband, William, left her, eighteen months ago, she had not for the first year felt inconvenienced by all the ensuing peace and silence. Not only was she soothed by the novelty of being an idle woman with a bit of means—she who had worked hard in the drapery trade since she was fifteen—but the drama of the separation nourished her for quite a while. And there were

the front and back gardens to tend, there was her correspondence, and also her temporary lodger, Miss Munro, the village schoolmistress.

Marriage, she decided, had badly let her down; it was a fraud if you judged it by the standard of what went on in the head when you were a girl or what shook you when you saw someone on the pictures or read something in a book. She had always pictured men as magnificent creatures whose behaviour, both physical and spiritual, was fraught with powerful incident. But after marriage she found William what she called to Miss Munro 'independent'.

In her fireside talks with the schoolmistress, who, apart from her profession, was of emancipated character and had sown quite a lot of new ideas in her mind, Johanna said she thought herself a full-blooded woman who could enjoy life "up to the hilt"; she could fully understand a love-murder or suicide. But William seemed not to have any blood in him at all, and she judged that, on the whole, men would always grieve women. Miss Munro asked her how many men she had really known, and this both cornered her and projected a sudden promising light into her confusion. But she sighed: "William is paying my allowance on condition that I live chastely—as that lawyer put it, though I'm sure it was William's old cat of a mother made him put in that clause."

From the first his mother had declared he was marrying beneath him, which was true if too much notice is taken of the different sets of manners and personal habits. He had picked up Johanna in a café in the country town where she served in a store and 'lived in' above the premises, her only relative being an uncle living at the other end of England. She felt very attracted to his saturnine appearance—surely beneath it dark wells of passion lay sealed?—to his big sprawling body, loose and needing to be made alert by a fervent woman's worship. A bout of male rebelliousness must have been working in him, or, as she thought afterwards, a fit of sulks against his mother; he had hustled her into marriage after only two months of what seemed to her a promising, nervous courtship. Presented to his mother a fortnight before the register-office marriage, Johanna never forgot the widow's swollen, silent face, like a red tea-cosy. William was her only child and she had always believed him to be sickly

and made him sleep under an eiderdown quilt even in summer.

His mother's first hostile act had been to ask for a return of the purchase money of the car which was necessary for his work, and he had to promise the cash in instalments. Fortunately he was prospering. He was an agent for farming implements, and, wonderfully alive when he talked of machines and new mechanical inventions, his territory was being extended. In the car he and Johanna found the cottage a dozen miles from his mother's house, furnished it hastily, and moved in an hour after the cold wedding.

He hadn't been well that day, and he cancelled by telephone the room in the grand London hotel where they were to spend three honeymoon days. He complained of stomach cramp. It made him crotchety. In bed he said the cottage was damp. She nestled up to him crooning and warming his poor stricken stomach with her own abundance—they had neglected to buy both eiderdown and hot-water bottle. She had never imagined a young man could have such cold feet. Altogether he seemed to be chilly as a fish. But she, she would flood him with her warmth and regard. She had felt like a crusader.

During the following months she made industrious endeavours with antics, teasings, amorous whisperings, and crude challenges. He complained; very occasionally submitted weakly; took umbrage; and was for ever discovering some new physical distress. They began to bicker, for he, liverish or perhaps feeling guilty, accused her of neglecting the household work in favour of slothful day-dreaming about matters unsuitable at a respectable domestic hearth. Healthy and ample, but feather-brained in her attitude to life, the constant reminder of the fact of her cosy vitality seemed positively to offend him.

If she had been clever, and not just a nicely silly woman, she would have got and kept him—or so Miss Munro thought—by pandering to his ailments and creating some of her own. Miss Munro said he sounded like one of those men that are passionate in gloom and only become alive at the sound of wails and in broodings on mortal decay. Perhaps he ought to have married a consumptive.

"No, it was only that mother of his," said Johanna obstinately; "she had wormed her way into him and he couldn't cast her out."

Every month had become more disagreeable than the last. Constantly thwarted, she began to make fun of a sacred subject —his constipation. Though a big young man, with well-moulded if flaccid limbs, a childish whimper would come into his voice when his body failed to do its daily duty by him at a fixed time, 8.20 a.m. One morning he grizzled that his mother never missed a daily affectionate enquiry on the matter and this had somehow helped him. Johanna—and she was not given to taunts or jeers —replied tartly: "So you're blaming it on me, are you? Well, I can't agree. It's because you don't take the natural exercise of a man." After this coarseness he sulked for many days, even though Johanna, contrite and fundamentally nice, began to make regular morning enquiry as to his condition.

Their final quarrel was over China and India tea—he liked the first, which she found nauseous—and her flat refusal to continue to brew separate pots at breakfast; she had got up that morning feeling especially obstinate. He stamped out to the car after eating only a plate of [illegible] and he never came back: he had returned to his mother. Solicitors made contact with her, and he agreed finally to pay her £150 a year on condition that she lived in chastity. After spending hours in an abyss of heavy pondering she decided that the best way to repay his mother was to refuse the divorce William had at first suggested. Of course it was the mother who then retaliated with that chastity clause. William, she bitterly knew, could never have thought of it himself—such a matter just didn't exist for him, unless it was pushed aggressively under his nose.

"Considering," said Miss Munro, "what a passing amount of pleasure sex gives, it causes a very disproportionate amount of upsets and spite in life. I've often wondered why people make such a fuss of this subject."

During the first year of the separation, so that the postman would call often, she wrote to numerous advertising firms for their catalogues, samples, or patterns, and she also corresponded with a "pen friend" of the male sex that she obtained from a London "friendship bureau"; he was an elderly cripple living in Glasgow and therefore quite safe even from her mother-in-law's spying; chastity couldn't be lost in the post. And there were the months when she lodged Miss Munro while her landlady in the village was in hospital after a serious operation. It was only after

that year that the full malice of the condition of her allowance began to dawn on her.

"Women," Miss Munro had said, "are always victims unless they keep their wits everlastingly sharp. We need to depend more on our brains and less on our feelings."

"I haven't got brains," Johanna mourned. "I'm a foolish one and all I need is a straightforward man who's lively."

"William made you a victim," said Miss Munro, "and so did his mother. . . . Be careful you don't get into a morbid state here. If I were you I would go back to the drapery."

But she couldn't make that descending action to her old dead life. A dreamy inertia began to hold her. There was something to be concluded in this her present life. William had left her high and dry, had made her feel herself a failure, but she couldn't quite believe that he intended letting her remain in this unsatisfactory state of being a kept wife that he never used. Perhaps one dramatic evening he would walk in and say, with shamed face, that he had discovered his awful mistake; his mother was killing him. . . . Oh, she would take him back and there would be a night of fire, her real wedding night, with William truly born at last. Miss Munro had told her how she thought it was with him, how there were men who were only half born, not released fully into the world.

Month followed month and nothing happened. After Miss Munro left, a heavy sluggishness began to oppress her. It sapped her will power. The cottage somehow imprisoned her, she had to force herself to go to the market town on the essential weekly shopping expedition. For days she did not open the letters from her Glasgow correspondent, though he had asked for her photograph and become quite endearing. She mooned about the stagnant house, stopping on occasion to realise that her loud remarks to herself or her cat bounded back on her emptily.

It was during the early summer that, after seeing a chemist's special window display in the market town, she bought a whole heap of cosmetics and began to amuse herself in altering and painting her face. Then she would recline on the sitting-room sofa and try to believe that a visitor, perhaps William himself, was on the way: it was said that if you wished hard enough, what you wanted sooner or later arrived. Soon she took to sitting at the open lattice. Why she sat there so long remained only a dim,

unformulated idea in her listless mind. Certainly it was not likely that anything could happen on that dull road.

On an average not more than three vehicles—car, lorry, or motor-cycle—passed in an hour, and rarely a pedestrian. The obscure old road dawdled past the crooked-fenced garden, crawled up a hill between the woods, approached a couple of farms, erratically avoided a hamlet and a boys' reformatory home, crossed the quiet local railway and eventually, serving no very useful purpose, drifted into the bustling main road outside Apscombe, where a market was held on Wednesdays. The cottage stood a quiet half-mile from the village; there the bus from Apscombe, using a more important road, turned round again and, after seven o'clock, left the place to its severe thick-wooded evening silence.

II

On her twenty-ninth birthday she allowed herself a treat. She opened the bottle of expensive perfume the floor-walker of her department in the shop had given her for a wedding present, and that afternoon she sat at the open lattice in a swoonlike appreciation of the exotic odour rising generously from her bosom.

And that same afternoon it happened. Thinking it all over the next day she felt that it was no more than she justly deserved. She remembered Miss Munro saying something about a law of compensation always working in life. That it happened on her birthday seemed an extra gift of the gods, who were at last considering her case. Or, on the other hand, was it only the perfume?

Once before, a driver had stopped to ask her if that was the road to the boys' reformatory. Today a lorry stopped. It was a warm day, with the five-o'clock light in the opposite wood the colour of greengages. Still plunged into her scented dream, she only half heard the lorry driver's words as he leaned out of the cabin. Smiling, luxuriously remote but pleasant, she could feel the blue heavy on her eyelids, the red smoothly dried on her lips. But even then she wondered vaguely if it was the perfume that attracted him. Advertisements said these essences of sorcery worked that way.

He left the cabin and leaned on the fence of her garden. A brown-armed young man in flannels and open shirt. Did he think

her hard of hearing? "This the road to Apscombe?" He raised his voice again.

She smiled in brilliant recovery, fully woken by his leaving the cabin. "Did you want the reformatory?"

"Do I look like it?"

"Cheeky!" She laughed. "Apscombe? Well, this road gets there by and by, but it isn't the best one. You should have turned left at the church. You new to these parts?"

"Worse luck." He nodded. "Taken a job in Apscombe, and I'm homesick. . . . You got a garden here!" he admired. "Reminds me of the one my dad's got, up outside Birmingham. Roses——" He was estimating her, glancing from the flowers to her face, quick-looking yet managing to convey politeness. Plus a natural physical vitality—and he was freshly attractive of face—a shrewd aliveness gleamed in his eye. Despite his job, a spick-and-span cleanliness hung about his person, and his curly hair was glossy, his cheeks tautly gleaming. He was a credit to his employer, whose lorry, a well-kept one of the van type, was inscribed *Joseph Wells & Co., Apscombe.* "He's got arum lilies too," he went on chatting. "I like a bit of gardening."

"My garden," she sighed, "is running to waste this summer. I've got bored with it."

"It's a picture!" he protested, sincerely. "Your cottage too—I'd like to bring my camera and take a snap." His eyes challenged her to make suitable reply to this.

But, aloofly fiddling with the lattice catch and sniffing up her own perfume, she seemed to close her painted face. It was as if a flower became appraised of an unwelcome bee humming in the vicinity. She remembered she was still a married woman and, with her private means, practically a lady now. She glanced up loftily to the sky. "Do you think this fine weather is going to break?" she asked, drawing the lattice an inch or two towards her. "My garden badly needs rain."

"A snap of you sitting there at the window too!" he said, concentrating on his own train of thought, and gazing at her with, it seemed, objective appreciation. "It would make a picture, it would, a prize snapshot." And somehow in his voice was knowledge of her, instinctive knowledge of her condition, even of the fact that she was alone in the cottage, half a mile from the village, with the woods secret between them. "Hey," he said

again, as the lattice was drawn another inch, "I'm new to these parts. Only started with this firm a month ago. Don't know anybody. I'm lodging in Apscombe. I've got a motor-bike."

"What make?" she asked, not knowing why.

"A Riley. Ever go to the speedway on Saturdays?" At the shake of her head, he asked: "Come one Saturday?"

"Oh no," she replied, starting and fluttering her eyelids.

"What I don't like," he said in an aggrieved voice, "about people in these parts is that they don't want to be sociable. They're cold-hearted down here in the South. I find 'em cold-hearted."

"Pick yourself a rose," she said, elegantly distant. "From that yellow bush there."

He leaned across the fence, plucked a rose, smelt it, and, smiling, put it behind his ear. "Well," he said, taking his dismissal like a man and hitching up his trousers, "must be off now. . . . . Expect I'll be passing this village now and again on the bike. Like me to being you anything fit in Apscombe?"

Resolutely, closing the lattice, she replied: "The evening paper."

Afterwards she scolded herself for saying that. And she was not really surprised when just after nine o'clock she heard the distant approach of a motor-cycle. For some time its sound seemed to circle with a changing humming, as if uncertain of the way it wished to take. Once the sound completely faded out, and she plunged on the sofa again with a gasp. For, after running to make sure the door bolt was secure, she had scrambled with an alarmed whinny halfway up the stairs, returned, swiftly closed the sitting-room curtains, put out the light, switched it on again, stood aghast, and then ran to the mirror, where she made the absorbed examination of her face which the looking-glass pools in the Garden of Eden must have known.

Then, as she gasped in relief on the sofa, the cycle's distant humming began again, became more definite, began to rip the night's silence with a steady decisiveness. She leapt up, ran yet again to see that both front and back doors were securely bolted, fled here and there and, finally, upstairs. There she dabbed behind her ears several drops of the perfume. The humming thickened to a roar. She was about to plunge on the bed and bury her head in the pillows, but remembered just in time that this would play havoc with her make-up and carefully arranged hair. The roar stopped

with sickening abruptness outside the cottage. She stood drawn up in the middle of the bedroom.

What a fool she'd been to leave the light on downstairs! The door knocker was carefully, even shyly, tapped. A little sound came from her throat, like the plaint of a self-pitying cat. But after the knocker was rapped twice she heard the caller begin to shuffle away. Then the thought struck her that it might not be the lorry-driver at all. Someone who had lost his way among the dark beech-woods! Or perhaps a policeman come to tell her William had crashed in his car and was calling out for her in hospital. . . . The motor-bike was being revved up. She ran to the bedroom window, threw it open, and called: "Who's there?"

"Me," replied a meek voice. "I brought you the evening paper. I've pushed it in the letter-box."

There was a silent moment, into which, as a forest is contained in a seed, all her future separated concentrated. Then, admonishing herself for being a silly out-fashioned little mouse—she thought of Miss Munro's remarks on freedom—she sang out: "Well, would you like to stay a minute and take a cup of tea for it?" Yes, he wouldn't mind a cup of tea. Happy to have found herself with a decision at last, she ran downstairs and unlocked the door.

"You mustn't leave your bike in the road," she said, laughing. "Will you wheel it into the garden?" By the time he stepped into the cottage she had put the kettle on and was lifting the remains of a sponge cake out of a tin. "I hope you've had a proper supper," she tittered, taking him into the sitting-room. "I have mine early. In fact I was upstairs thinking of going to bye-bye."

"Me? My landlady gives me a meat tea after I knock off at six. . . . A nice night," he said, sociably. "Thought I'd have a run round on the old bike. Like to sit on the back and go to a pub or a roadhouse?"

"Good gracious, no . . . at this hour!" But she laughed: a loud, long laugh.

The fact of his presence filled the little room gigantically. He was without awkwardness, secure in a jaunty up-to-date acceptance of what came his way in the highways and byways of the world—she was not surprised when he told her later that he had done service as a sailor. Yet somehow he managed to preserve a deferential appearance of distance from her. He was brushed up and smartened, oil on his fair curls; his skin shone from the drive.

He wore a snowily-white sweater and a check sports coat—"It's quite close in here, mind if I sit in my sweater?" he asked. Permission given, he took off his coat and comfortably lit a cigarette.

"I must make the tea!" she shrieked, and pranced out to the kitchen.

And it was she gave the note to the ensuing atmosphere in the sitting-room. The gay run of laughter, sometimes curdled in her throat though it was, persisted; after a briefly considering watch of her he took appreciative fire. Somehow they began a consciously fictional back-chat. When he asked her name she replied, fluttering her eyelids: "Brenda." He said that his name was Gabriel—Gabriel Smith.

"I bet," he darted, swallowing a lump of stale cake, "you've got a husband tucked away on a ship somewhere; if not two." She giggled delightedly: "No, I'm divorced: he told me that after being in the tropics he could only fancy blacks. He's a captain." Gabriel honked: "When I saw you at the window this afternoon I said to myself 'No wonder my cute lorry took the wrong turning; that's a pretty dame there that makes the country worth working in'."

Enormously amused, she cried: "Oh, you men, I've had enough of you, that's all you think about. I sit by the window because I'm bored. I play a game, gambling with myself how many squirrels will come out of the wood opposite."

To that he jeered: "Squirrels!"

Suddenly she became serious. Stiffening her shoulders, and putting her head on one side, she whispered: "Oh, but I'm so bored, Gabriel!"

"Hey!" he called, bridling in his white sweater, not liking this gravity at all.

"I'm so bored," she said, looking far away.

"You want to get out more, Brenda," he protested.

"I'm so bored," she said.

"—dances, the speedway, roadhouses . . . there's a dance over at Apscombe tomorrow night——"

"Bored," she said, "bored, bored, bored."

"A glass or two, company or a sing-song, that's what you want, honey."

"Life's a messy business," she said, staring as though a funeral was passing before her eyes.

"Come out of it, Brenda!" he bawled. "You want a man to look after you."

She started, looked at him, and gave a great released laugh; she looked at him with liking and, plainly, trust and acceptance.

What followed a little later was natural. The note of high gaiety returned to the room; the romantic verbal sparring was resumed. She took up a Japanese fan and plied it like an opera star, she warbled out badinage equal to his. Soon, breathing her perfume, he sat beside her on the sofa. After allowing a discreet amount of fondling she jumped up with a shriek and ran out of the room into the kitchen. Dodging him round the table, she snatched up a fish-slice for weapon. Dexterously he allowed her to squirm out of his woolly arms. She ran. Looking like a confident rugger player, he leapt after her with expert lightness. Into an unused side room, stuffily dark, where she could not be seen. He crashed over a portable oil-heater, and her great abandoned whinny exploded like fireworks.

That clumsy fall seemed to make him savage. Guided by her perfume, he found her and pounced. She squeaked. He made peculiar sounds like a bark. Half carrying, half dragging her, he bore her to the staircase, and with his squat broad hands pushed her up—for still she shrieked protest. When, however, he saw her bosom, of the odour and tint of firm vanilla blancmange, he behaved with an orderly though decisive esteem. And she lay in a trance of calm surprise, her chin dropped, the heave of her breathing deeply regular. Distantly, and entirely without malice, she thought of William—how, a week after their wedding, she had attempted to inspire him to the same sort of happy chasing antics downstairs, and how he had looked at her with a cold, sceptical eye.

"The headlight of my bike conked out coming here," Gabriel said suddenly. "Hope it'll last going back."

"Did it, dear?" she murmured. "Get it fixed properly by next time you come."

Downstairs she brewed more tea. In the sitting-room she took complacently to the sofa like a swan settling on water after too long an awkward treading of lumpy land. Gabriel had put on his coat and sat opposite, like a proper visitor, even to the politely neutral expression of his face; no doubt about it, working class though he was, he knew what manners were. Pouring out, she

said: "Next time I'll get something more cheerful than tea. What do you like?"

"Tea. Us lorry drivers drink tea all day. It's thirsty work."

"When will you come?" she asked, after giving him a look of appreciation for his tact.

He thought profoundly. "Friday," he said finally.

"This Friday you mean?" She laughed. That day was a Wednesday.

He looked at her in surprise. "No, next week. . . . You see, Brenda, I'm going far afield with the lorry the next few days."

"Yes, Gabriel," she said obediently. Then, with an air of trust and honesty—all that teasing nonsense was over now and they were established in a firm and loving relationship—she said: "There's one thing though—you must always come after dark and bring your bike inside at once. . . . You see," her voice took a parrot note, "my husband and I are separated by mutual consent, but he pays me a hundred and fifty pounds a year on condition that I live in chastity, as they called it. Until tonight I have obeyed. I don't think *he* cares one way or another, but his spiteful mother has got her knife into me."

He looked at her. He gave a little whistle, and exclaimed: "You've been risking something, haven't you! A hundred and fifty——!"

She tittered, her cheeks blooming. "I have, haven't I! Calculate it by only ten years and tonight might cost me fifteen hundred pounds. Isn't it awful!"

"Brenda, is it worth it?" he asked with great earnestness.

"Johanna's my name. What's yours?"

"What I told you. . . . Look what you're risking!" he insisted, his eyes brownly round.

"Can you manage this last bit of old cake? I'll prepare a proper meal for you on Friday. Some chops . . . and I'll get a few bottles in. So don't eat much of your landlady's tea."

"All right," he said, getting up; "it's your own affair, mind! As long as you don't blame *me*. . . . About the same time on Friday next week, then." He gave her an affectionate slap, kissed her on lips and ear. "I like your scent; it smells high-class," he said.

"It was a wedding present. I opened the bottle for the first time today . . . and it's my birthday, too, today." She said it at

last, with a celebrating smile and a delight in her eyes like a newborn happiness. She much admired his uncomplicated ways and words.

III

What a blessing were motor-bikes to country lovers! What an exciting music was their sound, swelling from a sweet hum to a shattering roar! She would always love motor-bikes after this. In their throats was the voice of her drama. By nine-fifteen her whole being was squeezed up into her ears.

The table, covered with a lace-edged cloth, was glitteringly ready. A bowl of asters stood in the middle. On the sideboard were a bottle each of whisky, gin, and port, and on the floor beside it were four vulgar flagons of beer. She did not expect Gabriel to drink more than a fraction of these, but she wanted him to realise that she was neither a skinflint nor a prude. In the kitchen waited a couple of lovely loin chops and a highly decorative trifle. All day she had crooned over her work, polishing the cutlery and putting the finishing touches to the restaurant-looking trifle. At nine o'clock, in a crisp new voile frock and her face made up generously, she sat like a lady awaiting guests. . . . Any minute now. "About the same time," he had said.

During the intervening days she had experienced more feelings of deliciously flinging everything to the winds. But the curious thing was that she had to make quite an effort to recall Gabriel as a concrete image of a man. He was like someone belonging to a dream, or to her open-eyed afternoon reveries at the lattice when dozens of things, ranging from Atlantic liners to lucky bangle charms, occupied her entranced mind. What remained more solid in her was a feeling of deliverance, of having been heaved up from the horrible stagnation William had cast her into. Nevertheless there were a few striking moments when memory of some of Gabriel's decisively simple actions recurred so strongly that she broke into a clap of delighted laughter. She must not let him go, no indeed, even at the cost of her allowance. He was such a gay one, a natural one. But on the whole she preferred the feeling that he belonged to her dreams—in them he was not only more handsome but more important. He was the knight with the feather in his cap who had broken into the silence of her turret.

At nine-thirty, rising frowning from the sofa, she decided the motor-bike had broken down. Often from the bus she had seen wayside drivers tinkering concentratedly at their engines. Last week his lamp had gone out. Very likely it was a cheap secondhand bike, thoroughly unreliable. Or—and for a moment she was pierced horribly yet pleasurably by this thought—he had met with an accident. Motor-bikes often had accidents. She unlocked the front door and went to the fence gate. Nothing of account to be seen or heard.

At nine forty-five she whimpered audibly in the kitchen. The dye of the cachous dotting the trifle was already smudging the wet cream. But she had barely returned to the sitting-room when the divine distant hum caressed her ears. Oh! . . . For a moment she crumpled on to the sofa, then sprang up and ran to the mirror. Had the torture ravaged her face? She felt as though she had been beaten all over with gnarled branches. The mirror comforted her. Whatever could be said against make-up, it did remain independent of the agony of the soul.

All the time the sweet humming thickened, began to buzz a louder and louder laughter, private for her ears alone. The bee was coming to his flower! Was Gabriel, as he drew inescapably nearer, himself laughing in awareness of her anxiety? Or—and more attractively—was he bad-tempered at the delay that robbed him of time with her? The humming became the authentic, the triumphant, roar. And it swept past the cottage. For an unbelieving second, before rushing out, she stood rigid. She was just in time to see a malignant red eye disappearing over the brow of the hill.

Someone visiting a farm. The humming died into the vast hollow night.

Back in the cottage she uttered a long, dry wail; it rose, circled through the stagnant air, seemed to recoil and hit her in the face, like a nasty fact flung at one. She ran about the house. In the kitchen she shot the trifle out of its bowl into the pail under the sink. The silence became like a swollen presence following her. She could not keep still: she crashed the cutlery into heaps, clattered the crockery, threw a saucepan across the kitchen, hurled an odd cup against the wall. And yet these noises of reality tore her nerves to shreds; still the interior dream bled from its wound. Then the floods of tears came and made havoc of the

make-up at last. Self-pity engulfed her. Presently, stretched flat on the hearthrug, this dramatic position easing her, only an exhausted melancholy remained, strangely half-sweet. At intervals she whimpered.

How exciting he had been, what a daring one! How he had arrived magically in his lorry after she had spent all those horridly lonely afternoons dreaming at her window! No one could blame her for believing he had arrived in answer to her great yearning. The morning after his visit she had decided that she would now allow William a divorce. She had felt a wiser woman aware of what pleasure there was in the world. She had realised at last that she just did not fit into William's arms, as she snugly fitted into Gabriel's, and it was cruel to make him pay for this.

When at last she rose from the hearthrug she even rebuked herself. Why was she so high-strung? A lorry driver might be sent anywhere at a moment's notice. He would turn up tomorrow night. "Johanna," she scolded herself, dropping three aspirins into water, "you're a fool. He's had a breakdown or an accident. You know very well you're attractive, and it isn't every day he meets a woman so good-hearted as you."

IV

Four days later, unable to bear the torment any longer and by then assuring herself that Gabriel was lying heavily bandaged in a hospital, she took the afternoon bus to Apscombe, carefully dressed in her best and odorous with the high-class perfume. Yet, despite her anxiety, a sense of righteous indignation grew in her during the journey. She allowed it full entrance to her being; it seemed to give her courage; and as the bus entered the straggling town, where glossy modern shops thrust aggressively on to the ancient market place, she churned up this indignation more and more, so that her face grew red, her eyes threatening under arched-up brows.

"I asked you to put me down at the Post Office," she snapped at the conductor.

"The stop's only a minute away," he said, giving her a sidelong glance, his nostrils sniffing.

"Why didn't you say so at first, then?" She turned to the listening passengers. "Anybody would think the buses were run

for the convenience of conductors. It's a scandal!" No one replied But she felt better as she descended, in an aroma of fine perfume, a lady of private means giving a last baleful look at the conductor.

Borne up wonderfully by this breeze, and having made enquiry of a constable, she went at once to the warehouses of Joseph Wells & Co. They were down by the old disused canal, a sprawling collection of flour-dusted buildings and sheds. Keeping an eye open for sight of the adored lorry, she wandered about the deserted-looking place until she came to an open door with a brass plate marked *Registered Offices.* Inside, behind a partition with a little window, a young girl sat chopping off the heads and tails of sprats into a newspaper—"Yes?" she asked.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Smith, one of your lorry drivers —Mr. Gabriel Smith. I am a relative."

"Smith? I dunno if he's in. Expect he's out with a load. Go round to the back and you'll see a building with pulleys outside. Shout for Mr. Preen, the foreman."

Johanna smiled at her dazzlingly. So Smith *was* his name! A promising beginning. She discovered the building and, entering it through a wide aperture with sliding doors, found herself in a huge empty space with two trapdoors above her. A ladder ran up into one of the doors. "Mr. Preen, Mr. Preen!" she called. Footsteps tramped above, and an elderly man in a dust-coat peered down through the trap. "There's the ladder," he said; "come on up. You brought the orders from Simpsons?"

Moving directly under the trapdoor she gazed up brightly. "I want to see Mr. Smith, your lorry driver. I've come a journey. Could you tell me what time he will be in, please?"

"What," he peered lower, more friendly, "you're his missus? Smithy didn't tell me he was expecting you this week, I thought he said it was in a fortnight."

Johanna stared up at him, silent for another eternal, important moment. Then, her whole being a mass of roused instinct, she said: "Well, Mr. Preen, I've come today instead."

"But did you know about the 'ouse? Smithy told me only yesterday that the landlord said he couldn't have it now till November. Fair upset about it he was." At her silence he added sympathetically, while his flat face seemed to float towards her like a pancake: "It's a devil when a man can't get his own wife

with him because there's no accommodation. We all been trying to find a 'ouse or something for you and Smithy. . . . You come down all the way from Birmingham today? Smithy *will* have a surprise when he comes in—'bout half-past five it will be. Pretty lonely he's been all on his own in those bad lodgings." Very interested, he seemed now to be sniffing the perfume rising from her hot bosom.

Though her strained neck ached, she still stared up at the sympathetic foreman. "Half-past five?" she said carefully.

"Thereabouts. Like to come up the ladder and wait here?"

She said at random: "Oh, I'll just take a little walk. . . . How is Smith getting on here?" Whether to stay or not . . . to face him . . . to denounce him to his foreman. . . .

"Champion. Our best driver. Reliable and straight as a die. The boss gave him a fine reference for the 'ouse. Ah," said the elderly Mr. Preen kindly, "when you get that 'ouse you'll be able to settle down properly at last. You come and see my missus if you want any 'elp. . . . Sure you won't come up the ladder and take a rest?"

She straightened her head. "Thank you," she said, "I want to go into the town. But you'll warn him Johanna called, won't you?"

"Johanna . . . Johanna?" he said, as if puzzled.

"Yes, Johanna." Her voice clanged like a bell as she walked away. "He will know all right, will Mr. Smith."

Outside, her strength seemed only just enough to bear her up. Yet she walked swiftly, her burning face held down. Avoiding the direct road to the town, she took the path beside the canal, forcing herself on and on. Away from the raging temptation to stay with the foreman, to see Gabriel's face, to stand and loosen on him the anger—and the threats—the blackguard deserved. Denounce him in his place of work, make assault on the peace of his marriage and the security of his job. . . . But she dragged herself on, not daring to stop or look back for a second, walking towards a pink light beginning to flood the woody under-distances.

Not until she had gone about a mile did she realise that of course he could ruin her, too, spoil her good name, rob her of William's allowance. A blackguard like that would do anything in retaliation. She stopped at last, and looked. Stood looking for minutes at the sluggish water of the dead canal. But it was

horrible thick brown water with a rancid smell. She swerved away, pushing herself on.

Three hours later, after climbing through a wire fence, she sat on the grass verge of the railway. Dusk was settling. An aching weariness weighted her limbs and body. In the torpor that held her mind one dull thought persisted—dread of a return to her cottage, to its silence, to a long vista of empty years there. If once she returned she would sink for ever into that silence.

During the three hours of wandering around a vaguely familiar countryside, her fury against Gabriel had exhausted itself and, in thickening inertia, she even dimly realised that he was not important and she had been right in fleeing from making an awful exhibition of herself in his place of work. The shock of discovering his baseness had cured her of *him*. What was more important was the fear that replaced the fury. Fear of the world and her helpless, silly life in it. She couldn't cope with the world—that was it. What had Miss Munro said?—that women, unless they had sharp wits, were always victims. William, with his mother's aid, had made her a victim. And now this other man had done it too—and in a common, horrid way. A sense of uncleanliness recurred in her. She despised herself.

Sitting on the verge, she gazed fixedly at the rail track. Once she made an effort to get up, but sank back dumpily like a drunken woman. Within the fencing behind her was a rough hedge of briars and blackberry-dotted bushes, and she had wondered if she could drag herself there and go to sleep: her eyes felt padded with swollen flesh. But she kept her gaze on the rail track. The need to punish herself remained in her like a judgment. To throw herself, she thought dimly, into some violent force and be ground down into forgetfulness; to be obliterated in a jet of scalding steam. . . . At the approach of such a force she knew she would rise and go towards it with obedient steps.

A man in a peaked cap and blue cotton jacket loomed indistinctly into her gaze. She started when he stopped and called: "Good evening." He carried a tin bottle under his arm. A signalman, sprightly-looking and young. "Got many blackberries?" he asked.

Craftily she smiled back at him but said nothing. Suddenly his eyes flickered, he became alert, took half a step towards her, his nostrils sniffing the perfume still redolent about her. "People," he

said in a teasing way, "aren't supposed to be inside the railings. Trespassing."

"Why?" she asked, cunning. "What time does the next train pass?"

"Like to see 'em go by, do you? Well, there'll be no more today."

She got up, rising with surprising swiftness, and, after giving the signalman a threatening look, walked away. . . . Waiting there for a train that wouldn't come! Fool, fool. Cheated again. Everything went wrong with her. She felt like hurling a stone at that grinning signalman, she wanted to shout something abusive at him. Grinning there so impudent and knowledgeable. She hated men.

It was past ten o'clock when she arrived home, having walked the six miles. After violently slamming the front door, she went at once to the sideboard. Never a drinker, it was only on special occasions she allowed herself a glass of port or sherry. Now she poured out half a tumbler of gin and drank it neat, not pausing, viciously, like a woman who wants to abase herself.

V

In the spring, after a long, bitterly cold winter, William paid her a visit. He arrived in a new and bigger car and brought, oddly, a bunch of florist's flowers. Johanna's rude reply to his diplomatic letter had not promised well, but no doubt he remembered the basic soft pliancy of the girl he had married. He was again raising the question of a divorce. His mother had not survived the winter, and a middle-aged lady of means, who in some respects resembled her, was interested in him.

Except for getting drunk, Johanna had made no preparations for his visit. When, courteously, he knocked at the door she bawled from the sitting-room: "Walk in, can't you!—it's your own damned mansion." He entered with the bunch of white tulips. The air of the cottage was heavy, it seemed with sloth and temper. Johanna was lying on the sofa.

"Well, William," she greeted him, "you look like an undertaker. Cute of you to bring those white flowers . . . 'specially," she added, "to one who's got to live in chastity. Sit down, dear."

Without allowing him to speak, and with a rapid change of tone, she went on: "You staying the night, William? Or will that stop the hundred and fifty?" Easing herself with a peculiar confidence on the sofa, she rambled on: "You're a mean old sheep with your hundred and fifty—you doing so well now; I can't dress myself properly on it, not after I've paid for my bits of comfort—a woman with that solicitor's condition on her has got to have something else, hasn't she? . . . Don't stand there staring," she cried irritably, stretching a swarthy neck out of a limp old frock. "Take a drink if you want one." Under the sofa a filthy saucer stood among the scattered remnants of cat's food.

He sat down wincing. "Now, Johanna, I'm sorry to see you so—so unwell." He mumbled, still wanting his bearings.

"Standing there with your mouth open like a dead fish!" she said heedlessly. Then she gave him the fixed scrutiny of the intoxicated. "You still look a gentleman at least," she said, "but I can't, I *can't think* what I saw in you. Still, I'm a wiser woman now. . . Well, aren't you going to speak?" she demanded angrily.

"Now, look here, Johanna," he began again, in a pleading way, "let's talk quietly and in friendship. We've been wasting each other's life. I've brought a proposition. The time may come when you'll want to marry again——"

"What!" she exclaimed, violently roused for a moment. "Me!" Then, with a solemn sagaciousness, she shook her head. "I'm married to the bottle, William, as I expect even you can see. It's less troublesome than a man."

"Well, then," he said more briskly, and very much the business-man now. "I'll make you an offer. Consent to a divorce and I'll increase your allowance by fifty pounds a year."

She became still. Fifty pounds would bring a useful extra amount of forgetfulness. She looked at him. Then said sultrily: "You're very ready with your money, William, very ready."

"You complained I was mean with my hundred and fifty," he pointed out, not liking her tone at all.

"Well, I don't want your extra fifty. But I tell you what, William—I'll take you back. Come back to me, William. I'll make you China tea whenever you want it; we'll be happy together as a king and queen."

"This is not a matter for idle jokes," he said testily, drawing

in his long loose legs sharply, and a flush spreading over his forehead.

Placing an arm over the back of the sofa, she heaved herself up. She seemed to be swelling. There was something like a choking rattle in her throat. But, safely on her feet, she said quite calmly: "That mother of yours, she's one of the women of hell now, and I hope the Old Nick's got her sizzling. The mess she made of you, William, and the spite she had for me!" Straightening herself with a jerk, she observed: "Jokes indeed! You always were a blind fool, William—though perhaps I was as silly." And with another change of tone she asked sociably, scratching her shoulder: "How's your constipation now the old lady's gone?"

"Look here, Johanna——" he began, very red.

"I'm going out the back garden to pull a lettuce for my tea." She gave a short, sharp belch—"Excuse me, William. . . . Well, good-bye—I hope you're gone by the time I'm back, dear." Ambling across to the door while, totally at sea in this capriciousness, he stared gaping, she grieved: "Life's awful, William. I've been so bored. But good luck to you, sweetheart."

"Johanna, I . . . I warn you——" he stuttered, though in a small, almost wailing voice. "I can——"

She closed the sitting-room door behind her. But he heard a shriek of laughter, and a high cry: "I'll take you back, William; I'll make a man of you." He got up with a threatening scowl, stood hesitating. . . . The back door slammed with what seemed a fierce pronouncement of finality. Still he hesitated. Then, as though the slothful air of the cottage had become menacing, he shivered and hurried to the front door.

But as he started the car up, the sitting-room window was thrown back, and a face looked out. A blanched, indoors face, yet bold and positive. "Good-bye, William," its owner called. "You'll have to live chastely yourself now, won't you? Unless you turn that woman into a trollop . . . and you're too much of a gentleman to do that." This face of a stranger, thrust out with such truculent ribaldry at the window, while a grimy hand waved farewell, so astonished and daunted him that he could find no reply.

Arfon

MR. AND MRS. EDWARDS DID NOT DESERVE SUCH A CHILD. There was nothing peculiar about them, they were chapel people and a respected business couple, he selling oil, soap, candles, and oddments from a cart in the streets, and she, a thin, staid woman, making savoury pasties on Tuesdays and Fridays, eight for sixpence and very delicious. So no one could understand why such a funny little boy was born to them.

Odd he was to look at, too. He never grew beyond the stature of a small boy of ten, but his head was ridiculously large, and the expression on his heavy grey face was of such gravity that no one felt at ease in his presence. He would stare at things and people with a prolonged intensity, falling into such depths of brooding meditation, it was not to be wondered at that he had the reputation of being an idiot. They named him Arfon.

His mother and father were convinced he was of idiotic tendencies. Mrs. Edwards never forgave him for appearing in a deformed state. So silly he looked, her only child, with his paltry thin body and massive head, she shut herself away from him in resentment and became angry at the continual ache in her heart when she looked at him. His father roared at him, protruding his thick lips and rolling his violent eyes, beating him for the sulky gravity of his face. Mrs. Edwards blamed her husband for their son's oddness.

"You got funny blood in your family," she said accusingly; "blood that's mad and bad. Ha, found out I have that your aunt was put away in an asylum and your grandfather in jail for whatnot. Gipsy blood is in you."

Mr. Edwards had come to the valley from another part of Wales. She had known nothing of him, but, since he attended chapel regularly, believed him to be a healthy and ordinary man, though she realised afterwards that it was to work up a trade for his new hawking business that he became a faithful member of Soar. She had her own little pasties business before she married him, but her health was not of the best, so when Mr. Edwards

paid her a visit, looked over her cottage, and proposed a marriage, she thought it would lead to prosperity. The day after they married, Mr. Edwards took thirty pounds of her money and bought a new horse and cart for his hawking, replacing the old donkey he possessed. He brought her nothing but himself. He bossed her into continuing her pasties business too. Gradually, especially in their mutual disgust over their son, they became of similar temperament, thrifty and mean in the house, regular chapel-goers, and therefore nicely prosperous in their respective business. You took a dish to Mrs. Edwards's kitchen and she filled it with pasties from a big pan.

Arfon always sat in the corner of the fireplace. Sometimes he looked at you with a slow and steady stare. You felt he knew all that there was to know about you. He was like a wise old gnome, sitting on his little stool by the fire. His eyes were sad and beautiful. They were so large and luminous in his heavy-fleshed head. Sometimes his expression was very anxious, as though he badly wanted to please people.

Arfon suffered a great deal. Except for a habit of dreaming visionary dreams and his unusual stature, he was like most other children. Especially when he was born. But as he grew, he found that the world was an ugly place. From the beginning he was aware of contempt and disgust. His mother's resentful rejection of him and his father's bad temper and anger that he would be a burden entered his heart without his being aware what they meant. And the mockery and jeering of the other young people in the place made him quiver with suffering. He had to attend the school on the hillside, and because he hated going among the other children, who poked fun at him mercilessly, he was a fool at the lessons. He would be numb with silent anger and pain. Once, after a particular bout of teasing from the other boys, and fury from the teacher, he had to be sent home with his knickerbockers dirtied. The boys never forgot that.

He went into himself for sustenance. He dreamed of imaginary worlds where the contacts of people were of a lovelier nature than in this world. He had a talent for drawing, and with a penny box of crayons and a copybook he would be occupied for hours making pictures of his dreams. And as he went further into this imaginary sphere he thought he saw its people all about him. He called them angels. He stood gazing for an hour at an old and

sulky plum tree in the garden next door, among whose branches several young angel girls were playing, dressed in frilly puce and golden skirts and bodices of shining silks. They were dainty and elegant in their frolics, leaping with fragile grace from branch to branch. Arfon would have liked to join them. When his mother's harsh voice called him from the garden, the girl angels became startled and whisked themselves with fluttering skirts away through the green leaves.

That was when he was very young. The headmaster of the Council school came to the house and complained to Mr. and Mrs. Edwards that he didn't know what to do with Arfon.

"He is a boy," said he in his untidy English way, "that won't make any headway in the world. And he's obstinate as a mule in his dullness. He is unable to do the sums of Standard One even now, and in his geography he is weaker still. He doesn't seem to belong to this world at all. For why is this?" The schoolmaster gazed at Mr. and Mrs. Edwards in a sharp and angry way as though he blamed them or thought them not quite right in the head.

Mr. and Mrs. Edwards were of the simple class that respects schoolmasters and learning. Mrs. Edwards told him timidly:

"He is fond of his Bible, and a religious boy."

"You should have him seen to," declared the schoolmaster with anger. "Is his health orl right?"

"A bit of fig syrup I give him often," said Mrs. Edwards. "Nothing he needs otherwise, as far as I can see."

The schoolmaster became quite furious.

"He didn't ought to be allowed to mix with other boys," he stormed. "He's no good to my school and he won't get anywhere He ought to be put away in a reformatory or something. He's not Normal."

Arfon sat in his corner by the fireplace. His face betrayed no particular comment on the conversation.

"Something will have to be done about him," continued the schoolmaster with aggressive decision. "He must be medically examined. Institutions there are for the Not Quite Right. It will do the boy good to go to one. Anyone can tell only by looking at him what a big dunce he is. He didn't ought to be in a good, respectable school like mine, really he didn't. Well now, I will speak to the doctor."

He was examined by the doctor. Dr. Dan, blowing odours of liquor over him, bade him strip, and handled and did this and that to the boy, afterwards declaring that, far from seeing anything wrong with Arfon, his body was perfectly made even though miniature in stature. Mr. and Mrs. Edwards then begged the chapel minister to interview their son.

Mr. Jeb. Watkin-Watkins, a bad-tempered bachelor of fifty noted for his fiery sermons, came and sat in the parlour, on the sofa because no chair could have held him. Snorting and sweating, he fixed his small elephant's eyes on Arfon and thundered:

"What parts of the Bible can you speak off by heart, boy?"

Arfon at this time was thirteen, and ever since he could read he had been engrossed in his Bible. He began to recite from the Book, without discrimination, including a great many verses from the Old Testament. Sometimes Mrs. Edwards, who sat in the far corner, bowed her head. Arfon went on and on. The minister's eyes became red, like an infuriated boar's. For some reason or other he was angry. He thundered:

"A dirty mind you got, boy, loving mischief." He turned to the mother. "He is a cunning lout, and full of mockery. A bad egg you got here." He shook a bullying hand at Arfon, as though he would swipe him. The minister's belly bulged out like a hill from the sofa. Arfon scarcely moved his intent stare from it during the whole of the interview.

Mrs. Edwards became very angry, too, in sympathy with the chapel minister. She felt that life had been sore to her.

"Did he ought to be put away?" she asked.

"He is possessed with a devil!" declared the minister. "Beaten out of him it ought to be. Dangerous he will become. Murder and violence and dirty work he will do unless the fear of God is put in what he is possessed by." He gathered his massive shanks together and rose, darting vicious glances at the staring Arfon. "Something must be done about him. He ought to be beaten and put away for a few years."

He spoke to the police about Arfon and the police spoke to the doctor and the schoolmaster. The schoolmaster for no reason at all complained that the boy "didn't ought to be about where there were women," but the doctor had him stripped once more for examination, afterwards insisting again that he was beautifully made if miniature and that the boy was pleasant enough to

him. So of course the doctor's word counted and Arfon, feeling ill-used, escaped being put away.

But Mr. Watkin-Watkins, pursuing the matter with the malevolence of the old-fashioned evangelist, declared that the devil possessed in Arfon should be whipped out of him. He coaxed Mr. and Mrs. Edwards to grant him permission to beat the evil thing out, and the parents, frightened of the horrors that, according to the minister, Arfon would commit when he would be a young man, gave way. The minister told them to send the boy down to his house one evening.

Arfon went obediently enough, for at this time he accepted the judgments of the malignant outside world with a frightened silence. Very often his stomach felt sick and his heart as though it were full of evil stuff, but some day, he thought, everything would be clear to him and he would be the master of himself. He hated and was afraid of Mr. Watkin-Watkins, the minister of the chapel, to whom people listened in awe. The sight of the minister was like a bad dream to him. But he was one of the great powers of the world.

So that when Mr. Watkin-Watkins, after lowering the gas-light in his dark, lonely house, went on his knees and invoked God's help in driving out the devil, Arfon waited in an expectant and obedient silence for whatever was to happen. Rising, the minister, who had begun to heave with anger again, told him to take off his clothes. Arfon did so and looked down with meek, silent resignation at his frail little body.

"You lie on that mat," said the minister sternly. "And don't you cry out. The hand of God is in this. A sacred task it is and for your benefit. You be grateful now for what I am doing to you. Old as the world is your complaint and as old is this cure for it."

Arfon waited, lying on his stomach. The minister took a long cane from a cupboard and, muttering imprecations and curses, began to beat Arfon.

"Out, devil, out!" rose Mr. Watkin-Watkins's voice.

Arfon had never endured such pain. This was far worse than the many thrashings he had had at school. The first stings were the worst: they made him bite into the mat to stifle his cries. He almost swooned away. Then gradually the stings seemed to lose their awful bites. Now they became quite different, warm and shuddering. He began to wait for them with a quickening of his

blood. The minister's voice had become a mutter of abuse and curses. Arfon couldn't recollect feeling the devil slip out of him. Quite suddenly Mr. Watkin-Watkins ceased and sank with a groan upon the sofa. And Arfon lay in a kind of half-swoon on the mat. His body was both cold and hot, his flesh aching in a strange torment.

He turned his head and peered round the room. Mr. Watkin-Watkins had collapsed in a big heap and was breathing heavily. The sight of his ugly fat shape heaving and snorting was frightening. Arfon felt that the dark room was besieged with devils. They had big jaws, fat bodies, and paws that tore and mangled; they rose out of the earth in the darkness and hid waiting among shadows, prowling. He suddenly sprang up, startling Mr. Watkin-Watkins, who swore at him.

"Put the light on!" screamed Arfon.

The minister, frightened of Arfon's cry, obeyed. Arfon quickly dressed, and Mr. Watkin-Watkins, his underlip shaking, fetched cakes and lemonade and told Arfon that he ought to be grateful to the end of his days for what had been done to him that evening.

"Cured you are now," he added with unction, "and don't you go behaving funny in the future. Soon you will be a young man, and you must not allow the devil to have you in his power again."

But Arfon went home with terror still vague in his mind. It laid a shadow over him like a menace. His hatred of the world grew. He would like to do something to have his own back. He would like to see people crying and full of rage at something he had done. He would be proud then. When he got home he stared at his mother and father with a vicious hostility. They saw a fresh light woken in his face. They examined the weals on their son's body and decided the result was worth them. For Arfon's manner did change. He answered back with impudence sometimes and could snarl like his father. He seemed more awake.

But he turned to his drawings with greater persistence. He began to draw ordinary things like old boots, pails of rubbish, a dirty shirt thrown over a washtub, and also fanciful things out of the Bible—the tablets of Moses, the does of Solomon, and the strange beasts of St. John the Divine. But his pictures of these things were so queer that he made people either laugh or ill-tempered. A shirt dripping over the side of a washtub seemed to brood in such dejection that it wept, and the weary boots waited

for death like old, sad women. Arfon loved his drawings with a fierce, protective love. They appeased a hunger that nothing else could satisfy.

He wouldn't grow beyond the stature of a young boy. Mr. and Mrs. Edwards continued to lament their lot; they didn't know what to do with Arfon, now he had left school. He was too fragile for the mines, and because of his strange look no tradesman would employ him.

"What you want to do?" bellowed his father. "What d'you think you've got talent for?"

"I want to make drawings," sulked Arfon.

"What d'you want to *work* at?" continued his father impatiently. "To earn money. Think we're going to keep you? And dead we'll be soon. What'll you do then?"

Arfon wished his father would die. "Draw pictures for papers I can," he muttered.

"The only thing left," moaned his mother, who would have liked him to be a preacher, if there had been money for his training, "is for him to help you sell your things in the streets. A hawker he must be, like you."

"Don't you call me a hawker, Mrs. Edwards," snapped her husband. "I am a respectable tradesman of twenty years' standing."

So Arfon followed his father and the cart in the streets and sold oil and oddments. He did his work with the uncomplaining delicacy of a saintly martyr; he deftly measured out the oil with his thin fingers and counted threepennyworth of clothes pegs in a manner that made the transaction memorable to the women customers. His old-world courtesy, his large eyes slowly looking at them, his darling small body, tickled the women and girls. Sometimes they did their best to flirt with him.

But Arfon became a very grave youth. His mind was always occupied with visions. He still imagined a different race of beings in the world. These fanciful persons were always tall, vigorous, and gentle in a proud way. He made pictures of them: walking, sitting, lying, naked or draped idly; and though their behaviour was earthly, their beauty was not the beauty of this world as we know it. Every evening he sat at his drawings, lifting the brass oil lamp to the kitchen table and sitting down in an alert and serious way, indifferent to any interruptions in the room. Once,

his mother, who had sat watching him for some time, got up and began to examine the drawings on the table. A flush came to her worn, dried cheeks.

"What are these, boy?" she cried shrilly.

"Men and women," he said, without raising his head.

He saw her thin, spotted hand, gone sharp and clutching, snatch up the drawings. His head jerked up. She was about to tear the papers, and he uttered a cry, fierce and dangerous. The mother looked at him, her action withheld. The fury in his eyes burned her, but it was not that that prevented her from destroying the drawings. Seeing his agonised face, her heart warned her of the damage she would have done him.

"You do pictures," she said, dropping them, "like that in my house!"

"They are good," he cried indignantly, and sighed with relief that they were out of her hands.

"Good!" she muttered, moving away. "There's awful your mind must be." She crouched over the fire. There was no doubt he was daft. She had never seen such evil things put on paper. His mind was horrible. Ach, she had been an unfortunate woman. But all the time her heart was aching with pity and sorrow. She dreaded what the world could do to him.

He was very lonely. Other youths would have no truck with him because of his queer look and reputation, and though there were girls who were ready enough to be approached, interested in his oddness, he was at the age when, to some sensitive natures, living young women are more fearsome than horned and tailed devils that have brimstone shining under their skin.

A small, fragile figure in a neat black suit, he was often to be seen making his way with a slow, dwarfish dignity to the coal-dusty lanes that led down to the river or to the large cemetery among the yew trees on the hillside. The river was dirty and weary as it wandered among rust-coloured rushes and hungry, unkempt alders; and the cemetery beyond its borders of yew trees was raw with cut stones and white pebbly paths among the rows of graves. Yet he experienced a mournful satisfaction in these places. In the hush of the cemetery his senses seemed to open like delicate bells of flowers, and the sound of the dusty, crawling river, as he squatted at evening beneath a tree, lulled him into a mysterious trance in which he saw strange figures and

landscapes. Then he would go home and draw what he had seen, in the light of the oil lamp.

Mockery hurt him as though death gripped his senses in an icy clutch, though he seldom showed what wounds it tore. He would only become impassive as a stone. He was mocked at enough. Children called rude things after him because of his little stature; acquaintances jeeringly asked him if he still saw angels climbing under women's skirts and up men's legs; groups of girls tittered as he passed; and the uncouth gangs of youths that go about the lanes tried to tear his trousers down. Often the world seemed to be nothing but malice and meanness and shame; he wanted to get away from the place. His father said roughly:

"What you going to do and where's the money to come from? At a disadvantage you are. A boy such as you are can't go out into the world like ordinary, well-grown chaps. Stay here you've got to and take my cart round yourself when I'm too far gone in my rheumatic to move."

He was a very dejected figure sitting high on his father's piled-up cart, the reins in his thin hands and stoniness in his grey, large face, while the aged horse ambled through the bleak rows of dwellings. Since Arfon could do the work thoroughly, the father took to grumbling about pains in his limbs, staying in bed.

Never once had Arfon been to the world beyond the hills of the valley. Newspapers were read, but the behaviour of that outside world might have belonged to another age or to a book. The knowledge that had been taught him in school was used up in dreams; there was no need to apply it to the simple living of the valley. Far countries and different customs were the substances of visions that he tried to place in his drawings. And so people laughed at his fantastic pictures, or angrily denounced them, or were upset at some, though no one ever forgot the power of their curious lines and completed designs. They had a life of their own and were not related to civilisation; they had the virginity of pure creations, like the art of savages on cave walls or in carved wood.

At last, late, he began to long for girls, being seventeen. He forced himself to court one or two in the traditional manner: winking at the favoured across the gallery of the chapel and approaching them after the service for a walk. Some went with him. But he did not like their amusement. They seemed to treat

him as a joke and he suffered deeply when they tittered at his high, romantic love-making, that was courteous and poetic. They were strong, well-fleshed girls and sometimes he had an impulse to maul them. But he was too proud, and so the girls laughed at him, getting their own back in dissatisfaction.

Then he became passionately enamoured of Dilys Roberts. He had seen her accidentally one warm summer day coming down the garden from the back door of her aunt's cottage. She was wearing nothing but a gay pale green undergarment and, unconscious that he stood behind a lilac bush, she half-waltzed down the path, with beautiful young movements, her heavy gold hair dripping in the shine of the sun. She uttered a little scream when she saw him, but stood her ground and began to abuse him.

"A Peeping Tom, that's what you are," she said indignantly.

"I come here," he protested, "every day to see if there's any oil wanted. Look you at my cart outside."

His face was gleaming with homage.

She looked at him consideringly and he flushed, becoming very aware of his physical oddness. She had a slight, thin face that yet was very decided in its contours, her red mouth wilful and her eyes dark blue and calculating. Her nude thighs were alive and vivid, her breasts were the size of full-grown pears. She was about eighteen. He drew breath and said in a deep, slow way:

"Fine you looked coming down the path. I couldn't turn away or do anything."

And a slight breeze rippled the silk of her garment. His eyes were warm and full of light. She looked at him and recognised his homage. Now she was very self-possessed and haughty in her undergarment.

"You knock the door first next time," she told him. "You got no right to come in people's private property."

He had never seen her before. Later he found that she had arrived to live with her aunt in the cottage. She came from Swansea and so was a town young lady. She was an orphan and failed to find favour with the people of the place. They said she was flighty. She hadn't been in the valley a week and already she was walking out with a young collier, a handsome lout who drank and ran whippet races. She had been seen smoking a cigarette. She was common.

Her beauty was a new world to him. When he thought of the

delicate slope of her thighs his muscles would clench in a new, quick ecstasy, and the fact that she walked the earth, that she went through the same streets, that she breathed the same air, was so exciting and extraordinary that he was willing to believe anything, that dragons and fairies and magicians and dog-faced human beings lived in the world. He would have laid down his life fighting for her.

She wore a lot of jewellery: large pearls and sparkling red stones at her throat, dainty rings on her fine fingers. He was a little cold about her display of these ornate things when he saw her walking in the streets. He wondered if they were costly. He saw the collier boy with her and stood in a numb, staring trance. They went past him. She saw Arfon and smiled at him subtly, her eyes coquettish and full of enjoyment. He woke into a world of jealousy and torture.

When next he called at the house she came to the door and looked at his haggard face with the same smile, her wilful mouth curled in pleasure. He always let her have oil, soap, candles, anything he had on the cart, for nothing now. The money her aunt gave her for the purchases she kept for herself, of course, since it was her beauty that got them free. And, looking at him, she basked in his intense homage and hunger for her. Her eyes encouraged him to stammer:

"You—you will walk out with me one evening?"

She nodded her head gaily, watching the excitement that inflamed his face. She had never roused such passion before, and she liked it. Her blue eyes were wicked and calculating.

"Where," he breathed, "shall I see you then?"

"In some quiet spot," she said, "where there are no people."

He understood that was because of her collier boy. He was content, though how proud he would have been to display her in the streets! They arranged to meet on the hillside beyond the school. And the couple of days that elapsed before the meeting were like a dream. The hills cried and the valleys murmured her name. He stole roses from back gardens because in their perfume she was nearer to him; he bathed in the sheep pond in the hills because the coolness was like her skin against his; and the warm sun, shaking off its red glow as it lifted over the rim of the far vale, saw him at his bedroom window waiting for the day.

He was at the appointed place long before the proper time.

He wore his best black suit and a bowler hat that gave a bit of height to his dwarfish stature. He stood beneath a mulberry bush and never took his eyes from the bend in the road. That hour's wait for the assignation opened up all the wells of suffering in him. Would she come, would she come? Or had she teased him? She was thirty-five minutes late.

She came slowly up the hill, glancing back now and again. The pale evening dusk was behind her, and his heart sang; they would have a lovely evening together in the mystery of the night. She wore a red tam-o'-shanter, a dark bit of a frock, and silken stockings. She looked impudent and larkish. The ordinary, careless way in which she greeted him filled him with acute chagrin. But she had come at last.

"Shall we," he asked meekly, "go up the hill, then?"

She peered up the grey slope of mountain.

"There's no one about," he said petulantly.

"Lonely the hill looks," she said. She looked at him consideringly and decided it would be safe to go. Too safe perhaps, she thought, and with a little gay movement took his arm.

"You're a funny little thing," she said.

That hurt him, because he hated any talk that might be applied to his body, that was miniature in stature but adult in perception. But the hurt was almost a pleasure. She was with him and holding his arm.

"Why," he suddenly asked with difficulty, "do you go about with that chap I saw you with?"

"Since when," she enquired coolly, "must I ask you to choose my friends?"

He was silent. He looked at her intently. And though she was with him and holding his arm she seemed so mysterious and inaccessible he thought that never would he have the courage to press her to the ground and kiss her. Yet he was burning to do it. He felt that he could never rest or sleep again until he had felt her body and kissed her mouth.

She became coy. She was fond of a bit of joking and a bit of lewdness. She began to give her views on things. She didn't believe in God, and the Bible was full of silly lies. Presently she asked him if he knew any limericks.

"No," he said. "You tell me some."

She shook her head. "I don't mind *listening* to them," she said.

Intently he kept his eyes open for a suitable hollow to which he might lead her. The ones he saw were already occupied with silent, loving couples; the hill was not so lonely as it looked. All the hollows of the hills were filled with happy embracing lovers. He began to be irritated and impatient at his failure to find an empty one. Dilys kept on chattering.

"Won't you ever get bigger than you are now?" she asked suddenly.

He did not answer. She laughed in a teasing way.

"I bet you make up for it enough in other ways," she said flatteringly.

Anger began to stir in him. But then he spied an empty hollow and sighed with relief.

"Let's go there," he said in a shaking voice.

She held back a moment, looking consideringly at the bracken in the cosy dip. But she laughed daringly and pinched his arm.

"You behave yourself, then," she whispered.

They went into the hollow and sat amid the bracken. He could not wait. Anger and irritation and hunger and homage were mingled in a rising fume of passion. He pulled her down. She uttered a cry at his sharp clasp.

"Let go of me, you brute!" she said indignantly.

He loosened her, thereby making an error. She appeared to be tidying herself.

"You mustn't be *bossy*," she said.

He sulked. Then she began to tickle him, subtly, with her lewd hands. His passion burned up and he began to handle her. But she lost her temper again and denounced him, calling him a ruffian and a rude, ill-bred boy. He subsided in a fret of pain and submission. Then again she began to play about with him, as though he were a baby or a doll.

"You funny little thing," she cooed "Darling little thing."

And because he was so hungry for her touch he lay still and let her fondle him. That was all she wanted, he said to himself bitterly; and, even so, there was an ecstasy as she touched him. But presently she tired of it and got up.

"I mustn't be late," she said. "Not tonight."

In pain he watched the beautiful grace of her movements as she shook the bits of bracken from her dress. Ah, she was so lovely, he could have died with her. Her cruelty was something

he could not understand; it was part of that vast implacable brutality that he had always endured from the world.

"Come on," she said, "my dear."

Her affectionate tone soothed his dissatisfaction. They descended the hill in the half-light of the summer night. She announced at length:

"I have a birthday next week. Fancy, I'm eighteen then! Soon I'll be a woman." She pressed his arm. "When is your birthday, dear? You must tell me."

"Not for a long time yet," he answered. "But you tell me now what you would like for your birthday."

"Oh, no, no!" she cried. "You mustn't give me presents."

"I got a bit of money," he said, "and there is nothing else to spend it on."

"Are you rich?" she asked. "Very well off you must be, doing a big trade with the cart. You can make plenty of money by yourself. But that's no business of mine."

"What would you like?" he asked.

After a while she gave way and admitted she had a fondness for some amber beads she had seen in the jeweller's window. But he wasn't to buy them, they were much too expensive, she wouldn't take them. And she became lovingly well-disposed as they walked along the road at the back of the school. She even called him a sweet darling.

Then he felt he would do and get anything for her. He listened in a desperate joy to her affectionate talk; he must keep this precious thing that had come into his life, he must not let it go.

She stopped in the shadow of a wall to leave him before they came to the streets. And suddenly she bent her head and lightly, sweetly, as though a cold flower touched him, he felt her lips on his. As quickly she drew back and, whispering, "Monday, at the same time and place," she left him.

He leant back against the wall, his eyes closed; and his soul opened within him. The sudden cool, sweet kiss seemed beautiful beyond all meaning. It cleansed out of him all the bitterness and dissatisfaction of what had gone before.

From then he lived in a quickened world. His confidence was like the strong full shine of that summer's sun. The next day he trotted down to the local jeweller's. He had a little sum of his own, hidden away in a cocoa tin up the chimney of his bedroom.

The beads, however, were eight shillings more than his savings; he was startled to see them priced at two pounds. But he went into the shop and asked that they should be reserved for him, paying what he had. Money was nothing but a collection of ridiculous round pieces. Dilys must have her beads.

He took the eight shillings out of the takings of the cart, and since his father still ran the business and took all profits, giving Arfon pocket money, it was dishonesty. Arfon decided that he would make it up by giving short measure with the paraffin. Nothing mattered except Dilys's pleasure.

And with a fiercer spurt of inspiration he began some new drawings. Of Dilys, clothed and unclothed, as he imagined her. He worked with quick, nervous energy, a heat in his limbs, his mind warmed through. It was as though he was possessing her as he drew.

His inflamed vision did not see what came through in the drawings. In spite of the untamed rough beauty of his line there was a sinister ugliness in the portraiture of the young girl. A cruel meanness hovered in her face. Had he been aloof from his personal reactions to the living girl even he would have seen the masterly vulgarity his strange talent had worked into the drawings. The cruelty of that ugliness emerged in a desperately triumphant way from the luminous beauty of her physical form. And he treasured these drawings as though they were an inseparable part of the loveliness she had brought into his life.

His mother watched this new intense industry with narrowed eyes. Her anger with him now was always mingled with grief. She could not loosen her love for him, she could scarcely touch him, and sometimes she wished him safe in death. She saw one or two of the drawings and jumped.

"Who is this?" she cried, wrinkling her brow, that was brownish and spotted like an old lemon.

"Someone," he said, working on, "someone."

She peered at them closer.

"It is that Dilys Roberts, the flighty slut from Swansea!" she exclaimed. "Ho, ho, she is the one you are interested in, is it? Fine pictures of her, too! Angry she's made you? And let me tell you, boy, she's——"

"Leave them alone and don't you talk about her!" he shouted in such a rage that she drew back as though from thunder. And

gathering his things he hurried out of the room. He could not bear her voice intruding in his dream.

He dare not think too much of the young collier whom Dilys walked about with quite openly. At the barest thought of him he wanted to do violence to the ruffian, fight him, maim him, assert his mastery in a high, vigorous way. But he knew himself helpless. When he looked at his own fragile boy's body he was filled with shame and anger. Why had he been born thus and what could he blame? At such moments he felt murderous with hostility and malignancy against the world. And he knew that Dilys's familiarity with the collier boy was still another grin of mockery from that world.

Again on Monday night he was quivering with apprehension that she would not come. The beads were in his pocket. When he saw her saunter out of the turning in the road, late, his sinews tightened and all his nerves were alert in an exquisite torture of shyness. He would have prostrated himself at her approach and set his mouth to the earth that her feet would touch. She smiled gaily and expectantly. She had sewn a long tassel on her red tam-o'-shanter, which hung rakishly on the back of her head. Her eyes were full of a wicked and pleased amusement and he wondered why.

"Happy you look," he remarked in his sensitive voice.

"Next time I'll come looking sulky," she said. "Perhaps you prefer me that way." They began to climb the hill.

He said tentatively, "Never am I sure what people are thinking when I see laughing in their face."

"Oh, go on, you silly thing," she said, and took his arm familiarly.

He brightened. "I have brought the beads," he announced proudly.

She uttered an excited cry. "Really? No, you haven't! You weren't so extravagant and silly as to go and buy them? Teasing me you are. I shan't take them! Indeed, I never meant——"

He drew the beads out of his pocket. The shiny yellow marbles gleamed in the evening dimness. She was silenced and, loosening his arm, she held out her hands excitedly.

"Oh, aren't they lovely! Are they for me? Oh, I shan't take them. I never meant you to buy me things." She flushed in gratification and eagerness. He dropped the beads on the tissue

paper and gave them to her. He felt the eager warmth of her blood and the gift was nothing as payment. His veins began to burn.

"I shall wear them!" she cried proudly. She turned to him and said generously, "You must put them on me the first time."

They stopped, and he took the beads. But his fingers trembled so much at her nearness that he couldn't fix the clasp properly. His fingers at her neck, while she laughed at him, he felt a sudden strange impulse to handle her slim throat in a rough, passionate grip. His heart beat like a hammer as the dark impulse leapt out of the unknown, his fingers at her slim, fine neck, her unbearably beautiful body so near to his own. He drew away, his chest as though filled with breath that couldn't be released, his face rigid. His fingers had mechanically fastened the clasp.

"There!" she cried, still quite absorbed in the gift, "aren't they lovely! Oh, I'm proud of them, I am really."

"Nice they look," he breathed.

"But I shan't be able to sleep, thinking what they cost," she said, fingering them.

"That's all right, then," he said, beginning to be vexed at her complete absorption in the stupid beads. "Come on, now."

She was very nice to him as they climbed the hill looking for a hollow, asking him about his home life, his mother, and his school life, and she seemed to be very interested in his short and abrupt replies, musing on them commentingly. But she kept on glancing at her string of beads.

When they had found a hollow and had sat there a little time she complained of a headache, saying the strong air of the hills affected her.

"Indeed, not very well I've been the last few days," she sighed. "So be nice and gentle with me, Arfon, and pet me. My aunt has been very trying, working me to death unwell as I've been too. She takes advantage of me because I'm an orphan." Her voice appealed to him not to be rough with her.

He was disappointed. He thought she looked well and happy enough when she had greeted him earlier. Still, he had heard that girls had strange bouts of moody sickness sometimes. His yearning arms half embraced her, but she lay as if asleep and, mortified, he had to be content with stroking her neck.

From that time she did as she liked with him. They made an

arrangement to meet secretly once a week. He complained about her open familiarity with the collier, but she lost her temper and told him *that* was something he did not understand, afterwards, in pity at his distress, adding that it was he she was fonder of but she was afraid of the collier, what he would do if she finished with him. "He's so big and bad-tempered," she said, "and he's got a hold on me now."

She often kissed Arfon in a sweet, delicious way. Within a month she had received from him the amber beads, a gold-plated watch, and some ear-rings. He cunningly cheated his customers and stole out of the takings and lied to his father about the value of the goods that remained in stock. Nothing mattered but Dilys's pleasure.

But there came a time when he could steal and cheat no more and he was left with only his few shillings of pocket money. October came, and Dilys was fancying a little fur to put round her neck; it was getting chilly on the hills, she complained.

"A darling little fur I saw in Lewis's window," she said, "just like real fox it looked."

"How much was it?" he asked, beginning to be angry.

"Only forty-five shillings." She sighed again. "I wish I wasn't so poor. I don't get a chance to save a shilling a week. My aunt is so miserly."

He felt, like a mutter deep within him, a revulsion from her rise up, dark and strange. And he thought bitterly how mean she was with herself. When they could have had such lovely times together. Her meanness, when she possessed such beauty of form, touch, and glance, kept him always at an intense pitch of half-angry and half-suppliant desire. He began to realise it, deep within him, like a submerged mutter.

"I don't know if I can buy it," he said, angrily kicking some stones away from the path they walked on.

"Oh, Arfon, I didn't expect you to!" she cried as though in pain at the very thought.

He looked over the stock of the cart to see if he could possibly sell more without his father suspecting it. He dare not risk it; his father had been examining the stock only a day or two ago. But that he was unable to get the fur nagged him into irritation and anger and hatred of the world. Why couldn't he ever get what he wanted, why couldn't he be happy? He was only really happy

when he was working at his drawings, in a kind of dream state. But he wanted to be happy in the world and with real people; he hated all the mockery and the harshness and the misunderstanding he met with.

Then because he had not managed to get the fur, he decided to take Dilys his drawings of her when they met next. These drawings were his most treasured possessions, but he would give them to her; she had not seen them. There were fourteen, and as he looked at them his pulses took fire from the strange, perverted beauty he had given them. Lately he had been unable to do any more drawings of her. Even at the thought of trying to design her on paper his desire would reach a pitch of intensification that made all work impossible; he could only lay his head on his arms and moan.

When they met she glanced at the thin, flat parcel inquisitively. He knew she expected to see the fur. After a while he said nervously:

"I have been doing some pictures of you."

"Are those them in that parcel?" she asked.

"Yes."

She said nothing. They climbed the ancient hill. It was almost dark. The landscape looked old and wrinkled. He said, with a throb of suffering in his voice:

"You must take them, because they belong to you."

"How do they belong to me," she said, "when you did them?"

She spoke in a voice of indifference. Again a spasm of anger contracted his heart for a moment. If it had been the fur! But her face was so beautiful in the dim light, her slim throat so white, like the soft throat of a great pale bird.

"Well," he answered, "I couldn't have done them at all if I hadn't met you. You must see them, indeed you must."

"All right," she said.

She did not brighten at all that evening. Her manner was so cold and aloof he dared not even touch her with his hand. They took a short walk over the hill and then she said she'd have to be going back. She felt icy, she said. As they descended the hill he told her that he'd like to buy her that fur she had spoken about.

"Oh, don't you bother," she answered. But she visibly softened. "No, indeed you mustn't."

But as a threat she didn't kiss him, and she was about to leave

him without taking the drawings. He thrust the parcel into her hand. "You be alone when you look at them," he said.

And all the following days he was in a fume of excitement, now that the drawings were in her hands. Now she had seen his real worship of her; now she knew how beautiful he thought her. All he dared not tell her was in the pictures, and all that he imagined her like. She would admire him now, because he could make such pictures. He knew they were good.

Impatient to receive her admiration, he called at the house the third day, with the cart at the back door. He called out, and after keeping him waiting some time, Dilys appeared.

She came slowly down the garden path. He looked at her intently. Something had upset her, he said to himself. Perhaps her aunt had been bossing her again.

"Two dozen candles," she rapped out, "and three bars of carbolic soap." Her hand held the money for the goods, which she would have for nothing, in her pocket.

He fetched the articles. Her face was pinched and pale with anger. As he laid the candles and soap in her hands she looked at him in a direct stare, with the terrifying fury of a female who is seldom stirred to her depths. She said, slowly and evenly:

"You do drawings like that of me again and it'll be the worse for you."

He stared. Then her voice began to flame up.

"What do you think I am, low and dirty-minded creature that you are! Been showing those pictures to people, have you?"

He stared at her. Something in him shrank back from her as though from an evil. Never had he received such a blow as this. He could not speak.

She became truculent. "You dare do drawings of me like that again and I'll tell the police. You ought to be put under lock and key." Seeing his strained numbness she added brutally, "Those you gave me I put in the fire."

His faculties started into life at that. But it was a raw, quivering life of anguish. She had burned them!

"You burned them!" he whispered.

She was dignified and superior now, eased by his suffering.

"You learn to respect me, you nasty-minded boy. People like you think that because a girl is nice to you she's what-not. There's no one can say a word about me. Even though I *do* walk out with

one or two boys, they might be girls for all the harm that's done——"

But he had turned and gone. He climbed into the cart and laid whip on the mare. The unaccustomed lash roused the animal into a quick trot.

The day passed slow in a merciless and taunting misery. He wanted the night and sleep. At last he crawled into the darkness of his bedroom. It was like the lair of a wounded beast. He did not understand the hurt that had been done him. Only it seemed that he must suffer for ever now. The last loveliness had been taken from him. There remained nothing but contempt in the world.

He could not sleep. And, strangely, though he tried not to think of her and what she had done, Dilys was nearer to him now than she had ever been. Before, she had been a beautiful girl who escaped his eager touch. Now, she seemed to be deep in him. She held his nerves and shadowed his blood and spoke in his mind like a ghost. And again in the grief of that night he longed to have her body clenched with his, to caress her sides, her breasts, her slim white neck. . . . When at last he slept, at dawn, his face was lined and exhausted as an old man's.

He had no peace from her. From his nerves and his blood and his mind she sang a low, urging song of mockery and passion. He felt goaded on to some unknown fulfilment. He could not live without her. The next day but one he called again at the house. She came out to him with displeasure held in her face in aloof elegance. He was dirt. She smelled of violets and she wore his amber beads. He looked at her and she saw his new fixed gaze.

"You will come and meet me the same as usual?" he asked in a low voice.

And she was fascinated. His miniature body was so firm and his ridiculous large head was held high.

"I wonder," she began, "you got the cheek to ask. But if you promise to respect me and stop doing those drawings, I don't mind seeing you for a little while."

"I will bring that fur," he said.

A gleam crossed her eyes. "Indeed," she said, "I think you ought to make up for the insults you've done me."

There were two days in which to find the forty-five shillings for

the fur. Trade was poor that day and the next. He searched the house for money. He failed to scrape even thirty shillings. But he would get it for her the next week. Surely she wouldn't mind waiting another week.

His desire for her became desperate. He would like to bear her away to some far vale among the lonely hills and there serve her and love her in lawless passion, far from the uglinesses of other people. The evening when, waiting, he saw her come round the turning of the road behind the school he could have cried out with relief. He was so obsessed with her that he forgot to apologise for the absence of the fur.

She was cold and aloof. But his senses were so quickened he did not notice it. They went up the hill. But she resolutely refused to sit in a hollow.

"I'm cold," she said. "I must go back soon."

"No, no," he muttered.

And he flung himself upon her with a sob. She was knocked over. He had not meant to do that, unaware of his strength. She bounced up, and the back of her hand caught him viciously across the eyes.

"Take that!" she cried savagely.

The blow went deep into him. He, too, reeled. And then the desire utterly to crush her came to him. He fell to his knees, his head whirling in a drunken darkness. The world was reeling and falling about him as the desire to crush her utterly rose up strong and triumphant. He remained on his knees, his slight body bent over, swaying, his head in the darkness. Her blow had been nothing. But he had realised at last her miserly use of him.

"What's the matter with you?" she cried, a little frightened that he had not risen from his curious swaying prostration.

He rose slowly, averting his face from her.

"Go," he whispered; "go away from me."

She backed from him, and he remained with his head dropped on his chest. He had no sight in the new mad swirl of desire that was beating through his body to his hands, which were stretched rigidly against his thighs. The darkness came out of his consciousness like the endless dark of death, and his old self was obliterated. When he slowly moved his face up, the girl was gone. With the slow, plodding step of a man who has doom in him he descended the hill in the silent night.

The next few days he transacted the business of living in a fixed and unbreakable silence. He spent hours staring into space, greatly irritating his mother and father. Then one evening he came home from his hawking and entered to a loud, furious shout from his father.

"Here comes the thief!"

His mother looked at him with anger and contempt.

"Found out we have how you been stealing from the takings for that bitch!" continued his father, his face mottled blue.

His mother put in accusingly, "You been buying her things. I been told. And boasting she is about it."

"Gold watches!" shouted his father frantically. "Out of my goods. A criminal thief, that's what we've brought up, Lizzie Edwards. In a reformatory he ought to be put. Ha, if I wasn't lying here bent up with rheumatics I'd put the whip about him. The whip he ought to have. A good whipping. The pounds he must have stolen. Gold watches and what not!"

He subsided into a whining groan. He had always been miserly.

Arfon did not lose his sullen silence. Only his eyes took on a deeper and more luminous gleam.

"Shame on you," his mother said in disgust. "And she going about boasting of what she's had out of you. A laughing-stock you'll be. A slut of a girl like that!"

"Out of my sight, you sulky b——!" roared his father anew, from his bed chair by the fire. And turning to his wife he said, "Oh, what are we to do with our business now, Lizzie Edwards, for a criminal thief can't have it. He must be turned out."

"Hush now," said Mrs. Edwards, looking from Arfon to him.

Arfon had said not a word. Their denunciations meant very little. But that his high, lovely passion should come to this! He suffered with the fierce, uncontrolled suffering of adolescence, that is like no other in its depth and misery. Silently he went out of the house. His mother wanted to follow him, out of the instinct of a subterranean hurt in her being. But she didn't. She couldn't forgive the gods their sport in giving her such an eccentric and deformed child. Let him come to his conclusion alone.

He wandered through the evening streets, not knowing where to go. At last, almost unconsciously, he got to the cemetery, where in his childhood he had spent such hours of pensive meditation. He had known serenity in this graveyard among the yew trees.

He crawled in through a hedge at the back. The white stones were mysterious in the darkness and there was a sweet damp odour, as though loads of chrysanthemums were scattered over the ground. The yew trees dropped their dim robes of shadow. This was the land of the dead.

Squatting against the back of a firm, sharp cross of marble he stared fixedly into the quiet dark. And almost he was soothed as he sat thoughtless and abstracted in the slow throbbing of misery. A silence rose out of the earth and laid upon him its pure cold hands of peace. For long he remained thus. He did not know that he should have clung in desperation to that source of silence that had been offered to him. Even in these moments he began to long for Dilys. He would forgive her all if he could have her touch him then. All that she had done to him. How wonderful it would be if she laid her head on his knees and, his hands in the thick drip of her hair, she listened to his voice telling her that he would love her for ever. He shut his eyes in ecstasy at the thought, his head leaning against the marble of the icy cross.

But she was not there. Again he remembered, and misery rose up full and undiminished in a new force and beat in his nerves again.

Christ, she was lost to him. She had cast him off now. She could boast of what she had got out of him! Christ, she was a slut, as his mother had said. Somebody ought to do damage to her. She ought to be made to suffer.

Rage began to burn up in him. His small chest seemed to swell to massive proportions, the muscles of his arms and legs tightened to an iron strength. His breast moved convulsively as he panted for air. He had risen to his feet, but he fell again and lay in the narrow space between two graves. His mouth bit into the earth. He lay there until the fury had subsided into a numbed pain clenched in the pit of his stomach. His limbs were stiff and aching and damp. A blackness had come over his mind. He rose and began to walk out of the cemetery. But his gait seemed a crouch, as though his mind was in dread of some doom. His face was mute and cold.

It was night now, and the main street was noisy with young girls and fellows courting and flirting. Everybody seemed gay and happy. Guffaws of laughter, feminine titters, and teasing remarks emerged from the shop doorways. The world was enjoying itself.

Arfon did not see a young man detach himself from a group of his companions and follow him up the main street. He turned to take the longer way home, down by the river beyond the houses. He did not want to reach home until his father and mother had gone to bed.

Down by the lonely river, that was shallow and dirty amid its stones and alders, he became aware of the young man following him. Suddenly the fellow strode up, caught him roughly by his coat collar, and growled:

"Now I got you, you little monkey."

Arfon glared at him in the faint light. But instantly he knew it was the young collier Dilys walked out with. He tried to squirm out of the grasp. It was useless. The collier's other hand caught him by his trousers over the belly and he was completely helpless. He began to shout and curse. The collier thrust his jowl upon Arfon's face and said:

"You touch or speak to my girl again and I'll half kill you, you little bastard. See!"

Arfon exerted all his new-found strength. He managed to kick the collier on the shin. Swearing, the collier lifted him bodily, carried him to the river bank, and threw him into a pool.

"Cool off, you bloody little ape-face."

He floundered to his knees in the shallow pool. His bruised body was full of murder. If he had a knife! He caught a huge stone and blindly hurled it at the collier. It missed. He took another and ran through the water to the low bank where the other stood.

"Ha!" cried the collier derisively, and leapt quickly on a mound in the river, caught Arfon, knocked the stone out of his hands, and ducked him smartly into the near-by pool, holding him face downwards in the water. Then he lifted him out and cast him contemptuously on a shallow reach of the stream.

Arfon could scarcely draw breath. He thought he was dying. His limbs twitched convulsively. Consciousness of the world had gone out of him. Then gradually he became aware of the soft, cold flow of water beneath him, and its gentle noise among the stones. His heart began to pound. He opened his eyes and saw the vast arch of the sky. And now he had entered another kingdom, he was of the old world no longer. He was conscious of a dark, sinister force in every movement, every attribute, and every

manifestation of this kingdom, a cold urge of determined cruelty.

In this new awareness he rose and was indifferent to the bruises and discomfort of his body, even to his soaked clothes, which were clammy and cold. He felt a desire to laugh, loudly and brutally, laugh until the granite hills cracked and were shattered in the grand upheaval that he could see at the back of his mind. He was greater than the hills, their massive power was as nothing compared to the power of destruction that was in his own mind and hands. They should see, they should see.

He went home in a kind of delirious ecstasy. That night he slept soundly, a deep, dark sleep in which he went down into the very heart of silence and annihilation. Now he had entrance into that kingdom of the underworld that he had sensed for some days, and he tasted of its sleep. When he woke, refreshed and warm, he lay for long in meditation.

He called at Dilys's house during the day. She came out to the back garden and looked at him curiously. His manner was deferential and his voice pleading as he said:

"Please forgive me for that night. A bad fit of temper it was."

"You can't be trusted at all," she said curtly.

His expression became humble. "You forget it now," he appealed to her in thorough dejection, "and I will be polite and respecting to you always. Oh, Dilys, don't you turn from me now. I will look after you well, indeed I will, I will do anything for you."

She began to relent. She still wore his amber beads, and her fingers, as she considered the matter with queenly dignity, played with them. Her face was aloof and dignified, her neck stiffened as she decided the issue. He watched her from beneath drooped eyelids. At last she said:

"Very well, then. You behave properly in the future and we will walk together."

"Thank you indeed, very much," he said with exaggerated politeness. And he added in a brisk, businesslike fashion, "That fur you want now? I shall be pleased to buy it."

She rewarded him with a pleasant smile. "Well, you have promised it to me," she said.

"That you shall have and much more," he said royally.

"We will take a little walk then tomorrow evening, shall we say?" she granted him with equal generosity.

"Thanks now, thank you," he said, out of his throat, as though he were moved to tears at the reconciliation. But he would not lift his eyelids and look at her fully. Without losing his deferential manner he muttered more thanks and left her. The blood in his veins sang.

He bought the fur, stealing, with careless indifference, the money from the next day's takings. His father thought that he would not dare steal again, after the discovery of his previous dishonesty. His mother watched him narrowly as he prepared to go out, aware of the subtle change in his features and expression. She began to be afraid of him, and that night she prayed on her knees that he would become a good, God-fearing young man. Lately he had refused to go to chapel and she thought he would become a disordered atheist. She prayed long and simply for his safety, going to God with the confidences and fears she couldn't bring herself to utter to her son.

It was a cold, windless night. The hills, under the high, dark blue sky, had the stillness of eternity. Their stretches of tawny earth and [illegible], that had been trod by the Druids in their secret sacrifices, swept up in terrific repose to the silence of that immaculate sky. So far, far away seemed the heavens, withdrawn and aloof from the trivial human habitations in the valley. Only the granite shoulders of the hills yearned, in their magnificent dignity and silence, to the sky that was so supremely high and apart. Humanity seemed nothing. Arfon, a tiny figure climbing the lowest slope of one of the hills, beyond the raw cemented school dwelling, looked like an insect crawling over their immense sleeping limbs.

He was glad it was such a still night. There was nothing to distract him. He felt the loneliness of the hills. No one came to them when the cold weather set in; there would be plenty of unoccupied hollows tonight. In his hand he carried a parcel; the fur.

As usual Dilys was late. But tonight he was not impatient. He waited in the shadow of a naked shrub like an image of stone, his large head scarcely moving even when he saw her come slowly round the bend beyond the school. But, as she approached, his veins tightened until they seemed like knotted whips over his body. In a spasm of delight he listened to the little tap, tap of her feet, and for him the sound rang to the high skies.

They greeted each other politely.

"Oof!" she said, "there's a rush I've had to get here. And I can't stay long this time. Such a cat for watching me my aunt is now. Is that the fur you're carrying, Arfon dear?"

"Yes," he said.

"Oh, that's nice of you. Let me see it at once. I want to wear it now. My throat is cold." She stretched her hand for the parcel eagerly.

He gave her a teasing little smile. "I will put it round your throat presently," he said. "You will be nice now and let me have the pleasure of putting it on you? Wait until we get to the top of this hill though. A bit of light there is on the hilltops and we can see it better."

"Oh," she pouted, "let me have it now."

"I like to tease you," he said, smiling. "You shan't have it until you have been a little walk with me. There, shut up now and say no more." He pretended to be very bossy, like a young man courting a girl properly.

She peered at him. "Indeed," she said doubtfully, "I don't know if I can trust you so far away from the houses." She looked towards the aloof hilltop in apprehension. Then she remembered his frail-looking stature and how she had clouted him the last time. And the fur excited her, though she did not like Arfon's demeanour, that had a touch of jeering.

"Come on, then," she said impatiently, beginning to hurry up the hill.

She went on a step or two before him. He kept his eyes on her dim shape. The path was narrow and ascended in a winding fashion. Above, the slope spread deserted under the great nave of the sky. No moon or star had appeared but still there was a dim grey light. He was no longer aware of the beautiful shape and movements of her body. He saw her now as a symbol he could desecrate in a last triumphant act of power and contempt.

"Very quiet you are," she called back to him.

"A lot to tell you I have when we get to the top," he said.

They walked together when they reached the brow of the hill, where granite boulders were scattered like prehistoric monsters asleep. The grey light was still and cold under the dark blue of the sky. Arfon peered about.

"We can't stay long," she said. "A little walk and then I must go. Give me the fur now, you funny boy."

"We must rest," he said, "before we part."

And coaxingly he led her to a dip in the upland, untying the string of the parcel as they walked to it.

"There's a lovely soft fur!" he cried, rippling the length of the garment before her.

She stretched her eager hands to catch it. He ran into the hollow of the dip, flying the fur. The bracken was withered and dead. He flung himself into the lap of the hollow and rolled over, caressing the fur and laughing. She had followed him and stood appealing for the garment.

"I don't think you shall have it!" he cried, smoothing the hair with his hands. "I like it myself. Indeed I'd like to sleep with it. So soft and nice it feels, to keep me warm in the winter." And he rolled over again, putting his face in the fur and uttering strange laughter in his throat.

She dropped on her knees at his side, stretching out her arms, her face pouting and greedy. She wore a green satin frock that shone. From its bodice her neck emerged naked and white.

"Give it to me!" she cried, reaching her hand and trying to pull the fur away.

He lay stretched with his face buried in the hair of the garment, his hands gripping it fast.

"Give it to me!" she pouted.

He lifted his head and saw her leaning to him, her face stretched beseechingly, her eyes shining with greed, her neck long and bare.

"Come, then!" he said.

She leaned further to him, on her knees. He lifted himself and with slow gestures placed the fur over her shoulders. She went very still, staring at him.

"Let me place it," he whispered.

He gripped each end of the fur and, crossing them, pulled them tight, at the same moment rising to his feet and thrusting her on her back. He knelt on her, never losing his firm grip of the fur. Her choking cries were strange and awful. He had never heard their like. His own voice uttered quick, deep sighs, that were like groans, while his chest heaved and sank. Tighter and tighter he pulled the fur. And she went silent, though her body continued to throb beneath his legs.

Then at last, when his own nerves were ready to snap in the terrible desire that beat through his body and his hands, he gave way and fell on her in exquisite relief. He swooned away into depths of unknown consciousness that became like great seas covering him. And he wanted to die, he wanted to die in that bliss of unfathomable depth, he never wanted to rise again to the world. He lay still. And in a soft passion of relief he thought that death was coming to him. His being seemed to flutter in the depth where it lay so far from the world, his shut eyes became firm, and all feeling went from his limbs. The soft rise and fall of thought in his mind told him he was dying, and he was filled with a gentle gratitude. Then at last he fell into deep, serene slumber.

He lay there for a couple of hours, and woke with a start. He was shuddering with cold. He wondered what strange, soft substance his face lay in. His eyes still closed, he put up his hands and felt the fur.

He drew away from the girl in deathly fear, his voice crying out. And then he lay groaning in the withered bracken at her side. When at last he lifted himself and, in that cold mountain radiance of the night-blue sky, saw her face gone still in death, he went rigid with terror.

Yet he remembered and knew it had to be done. Only now it was so awful. His belly was icy with sickness and horror, his shoulders swayed, his legs grew limp. He fell again to the ground and clawed at the bracken.

When he lifted himself his shrunken face was contracted in tearless weeping. All his body was contracted in pain. He saw her face stretched out as it gazed at the sky in dark, statuesque suffering, and he cried out that he might die. He could not stand the sight of her. He began to stumble away from her stretched, still figure staring up in death. And he could not bear the silence, which his broken sobs deepened, he could not bear the awful height of sky and stretch of barren upland, with the dim outlines of the greater hills so cold and dead against the dark blue. He stumbled on. He must cry it out, he must tell, the earth must know what lay staring up so silently to the sky. He must tell, he must tell.

He began to crawl down the steep hillside, not waiting to find the path. He saw the dim rows of dwellings far below in the valley. He did not think of the consequences his tale would have

for him. He could be hurt no more. Only he must escape and tell what lay stretched in death up in the hills. She must not lie there in her awful staring.

This was the end. His heart knew it was the end, and if only he could forget her face lying up there he thought he would know peace. He did not want to live any more. He had had enough of all that was done under the sky. Yet he continued to weep and sob, stumbling down. The hills lay in silence all about him. They looked magnificent in their eternal tawny sleep under the high arch of the far skies. Such strength of silence and eternity they had, Arfon should have been eased as he stumbled and crawled in disordered weeping, down to the houses of the people.

Abraham's Glory

WHEN CASPAR BEYNON BURIED ELIZABETH, the mother of his eighteen live children, people said: "Come to a full stop he has now. His duty done, a sit-back he'll be. Certain it is, too, there's no woman wants to look after eighteen." Or indeed, people felt, risk another eighteen. For Caspar was not yet fifty, his eldest daughter still under full size, and his eldest son only just begun work in the pits.

They all lived in a specially erected house, built partly on the proceeds of a chapel performance of Handel's oratorio *Samson* given in aid of the famous family. The house was up on Jack Sensation's field behind the slaughterhouse. Every window shone clean as sunlight. On its completion the key had been ceremoniously handed to Caspar by a Justice of the Peace, and a photo of the family appeared in the paper. The J.P., in a sober speech, had said: "Caspar is our Abraham. Turn to Genesis, where the Lord said to Abraham, 'Look now toward heaven and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them. . . . So shall thy seed be'. Our Caspar, seems like it, the same."

It was this public ceremony that had really given Caspar his overweening pride in himself. He began to think of himself as an example and a precept to the world. In the history of Abraham

he read how the Lord chose to make him exceeding fruitful and a father of nations and of kings. And was not Abraham fruitful in his hundredth year? Caspar looked at the stars. A miner, with a good place in No. 1 pit, he was tough and lithe as a whip in the body. His face was of saturnine cast, but his tongue was loquacious in a seemly way. Even down in the pit no one dared joke to him about his stalk of brussels sprouts—as, behind his back, the family was called; he was a man who would stand no nonsense.

Caspar ruled his brood with a rod of iron. He kept a register of his children, and every night at seven he would call out their names and put beside them a black or red mark. At the month's end he awarded boiled sweets out of a jar according to red marks earned; the size of the family did not allow pocket money. But in another jar, high up in a cupboard, was a collection of brownish little twists like pieces of cord, each with a tiny label. One Sunday morning those of the children who were already of sense—and Caspar did not believe in keeping them ignorant of the wonder of life—understood the significance of this mysterious jar.

Gomer, the eldest son, had promised to be a lazy young man. Twice he had neglected to clean out the pigsty top of the field. Just come nineteen, on the Saturday night he had not attended the calling of the register. He had long, indolent legs, torpid eyes, and was not likely to get on in the pits, where only that week his father had learnt of his reputation.

That Sunday morning he came down to breakfast and found everybody waiting for him round the big table, staring in silence at their empty plates. At the head sat Caspar. Gomer slouched in. His place was next his father's. On his plate was a twirl of dried brownish string. Caspar allowed the silence to reign awhile. Gomer stared at the cord. His father's voice came bleak and solemn:

"Into the world you came with only that and out of the world you will go with only that. Yours it is; take it. Nothing else will you get from me."

He formally handed his son an empty envelope. Gomer, scowling, put his cord into it. But he looked frightened. At Caspar's sign Morfydd, the eldest daughter—for this was just after the mother's death—lifted the big teapot and poured out; by her side pretty Olwen stood with a ewer of hot water. Nothing

more was said. Some of the children had their mother's stamp and were dumpy in their chairs, but most of them were of their father's darkly austere mien. All looked healthy.

Three times more Caspar had occasion to thus give warning to his children, for out of eighteen there are sure to be some that show blemish. When she was sixteen, pretty Olwen herself, supposed to be her father's favourite, found her cord on her Sunday breakfast plate. Caspar refused to overlook sloth, frivolity, and no ambition. He wanted all his children to grow up good pillars of the country. He tended their minds, and on Tuesday and Friday nights read out to them from such classics as Vicar Prichard's *Welshman's Candle* and Llwyd's *Book of the Three Birds*. Striking a tuning fork, he taught them singing, too, and made them into quite a little choir. At Easter he distributed penny chocolate eggs to them, having saved up the eighteenpence from his year's tobacco money.

Elizabeth had died not long after seeing that her eighteenth was safely on his legs. She was a woman with a large, gently clumsy body and eyes of a pondering liquid brown. During her last year she had a strange air of virginity, as if, having fully completed the circle of flesh's meaning, she had returned to a placid young freshness. Yet she went. Perhaps because her task had been done so completely and the earth knew it and whispered enticingly: "Come back, Elizabeth. Well done, my good and faithful daughter. Come back."

It was a blow to Caspar and it was not a blow. He had liked Elizabeth and she had never thwarted, annoyed, or disobeyed him. But facts had got to be faced. Being forty-four, her eighteenth would have been her last. This had grieved him. Eighteen was an in-between, slovenly number, neither small nor large. And his own power was still full-pelt within him. Still in his dreams he saw himself populating the world, with the great Beynon family worshipping under all suns. Wherever there were children of God, there, too, would be a Beynon descendant.

The evening following Elizabeth's funeral, after calling out the register, he closed the book and said:

"Now then. A new day tomorrow, sad enough. Gone is your mother Elizabeth Ann Beynon. No more her footstep on the stairs and her hand lighting the candles. In her time like a wealthy damson tree she was; remember her with respect in your hearts.

Now I am saying this to you: My mourning for the late Elizabeth Ann Beynon is great, but time is not stopping for mourning. Forty-nine I am and a lot to be done yet. And eighteen of you there are and a new mother needed. In a week or two I am going down into the country to make arrangements."

And, deaf to the criticisms of the valley people, he went off on his search. He had connections still left in the country where, amid the clean farms, the healthy cattle, the grain, and orchards, he believed that unruined and willing women could still be found.

Within a month he wrote home to Morfydd in his bold round hand: "Prepare my bedroom, wash the lace, beeswax the floor, and air the bed. I am marrying down by here and will come after the wedding day at once, Monday next."

The new wife was redheaded, twenty-eight, and looked healthy as a young cat; Sian by name. How he got her was a mystery, but she seemed glad to be married to Caspar. She accepted the eighteen, who were ranged up, washed, and in their best clothes for her arrival, without opinion, though later that night she bawled, bossy: "Off to bed with you now, go on."

Caspar looked at her with the bright, calculating eye of a young man. "I am Abraham," he announced to her.

She put her head on one side and smiled wheedlingly.

Everywhere, except in the connubial chamber, the house was bare, the strict furniture for use only and no decorations. But in the room where he now led her by the hand festoons of white lace draped bed, mantelpiece, window, and furniture. A fine spreading fern grew in a puce pot standing on a column of mock marble. Garlands of fat pink roses were painted on the toilet things on washstand and under bed; this set, all to match, had been presented to Caspar by his pit manager after that performance of Handel's *Samson*. The four big engravings, each frame with its drapery of lace like a window, were of bygone preachers famed for sermons of fire. The huge bed was of brass and feathers. Sian pushed her strong arm into it and nodded satisfied. "It is aired."

"Your hair," said Caspar, "is red enough to warm the bed of old Jack Frost himself."

"And Jack Frost you are not," she answered solidly.

He found her behaviour was without stint and congratulated himself on his good fortune.

But a year passed without signs. Depriving himself and even the eighteen of this and that, he fed her on cream, fruit, fat slices of ham, middle cod, and young chickens. She ate all with enjoyment. But she remained flat. Another year passed and still she did not wax. Yet she flourished enough in other ways. Her manner was active and she would sing as she pegged the family washing on the long, long line out in the back. Caspar, unable to believe the suspicion in his heart, said with dangerous vexation: "What's the matter with things now!"

"Oh," she said, offhand, "boss nature you cannot."

After the third year he burst out: "You are empty as a pod without peas. You have deceived me."

"Eighteen you got," she pointed out justly. "Surely you can rest in peace now?"

"You mind your own business," he cried in great anger. "Don't you go sheltering behind the work of the late Elizabeth Ann Beynon. Or dodging about." And, fixing her with his sultry eye, he asked if she was barren. She tossed her head and said: "Yes."

His anger was awful. He cornered her and, with that power which had grown in him as a man of fame, forced explanation from her. Her history, kept from him in the country where he had judged her by the swing and dash of her fresh-looking body, was dark. An Irish fireman in a boat plying between Ireland and Pembroke had been her lover; afterwards she had gone to an old woman of the hedges, also she had fallen off a bicycle when she ought not to have fallen off a bicycle. She spoke sulkily now, and in guilt. In defence she said that with eighteen of someone else's to look after he ought to be glad of anyone, and at his age too.

But that was the last insult. Besides her main blemish, this woman was paltry and had no understanding of his heart's glory or his soul's dreams. He backed from her. The same day he told his eldest daughter to fold all the lace in the bedroom and to put away the rose-garlanded porcelain. The pillared pot of fern and the pictures were removed. Then at once he went to consult Timothy the solicitor.

"Aye, aye," Timothy said, "divorces there are. But it'll be a long job. And a costly. Willing she is?"

"She'll be willing," Caspar said. "And the money will be found."

From the solicitor he went to rich old Andrew Andrews, whose

love was property, and said he wished to raise a mortgage on his house. Andrew promised to accommodate him. Perspiring now, he hastened on to Parch David Sandringham Davids, minister of the chapel where he used two pews. D.S.D. laid his hands comfortably over his paunch and listened close, his eyes beady.

"No," he pronounced at last, "no, certainly not. This and that would be said. The divorce I can't stop; between a man and his soul that is. But to take another woman into your bed pending is wicked. Besides," he warned, "go against you in the divorce it would. Timothy wasn't saying you could do that, was he?"

"I didn't mention about it," Caspar said fretfully; and anguish for three years of waste had strangely undid him. "Dark I was going to keep it. Three years lost——"

"You cannot," said D.S.D. in his well-known manner, "keep a woman in your bed dark. It is the thing above all that shouts from the housetops. It clangs louder than the town crier's bell, it is the hooter of the pits, it is the biggest noise in the market place. Why this is don't ask me. A mystery it is even I have failed to understand."

The next few months were black ones for Caspar, even though things were on the move, including the mortgage and the first skirmishes of the divorce. He could not forget those wasted three years. He became very irritable, though Sian was no longer under his eyes. She had gone back to the country, tossing her red head but agreeing to all Timothy's instructions; guilt had always been deep in her. Caspar gave her the fare to the country, where her eye was on someone else, and a bit of pocket money.

"Forgive you," he had said to her, "for playing about wastefully with me I cannot! Three years gone for nothing! Go now, go. Out of my sight."

One evening after calling the register he said testily to the assembly: "Growing up a lot of you are, and time for courting. Just past sixteen your mother when she married me, and me twenty. There are those of you that are equal and more those ages and yet no signs I see that you are doing what you are on the earth to do. Now then! Fretting me you are. Don't you stint yourselves where marriage is concerned. You, Gomer, and you, Morfydd, and you, Olwen. Let me see three weddings of you this year and then in short time a rising in you, my daughters, and in you, Gomer, a proper conceit."

"A Bachelor I want to be," called Gomer rawly. It was as if his father's fertility had given him horror.

"A bachelor!" And Caspar's scorn was biting. "There is no such thing as a bachelor. Live he doesn't. A shadow he is. He folds up early and mopes in death's corner. Death takes him and says: 'Hollow seed this is, no good to the earth, chuck him away'. Into thin air he goes and is not remembered." Caspar's face became darkly ferocious. "Don't you be disgracing me, Gomer. You go out this very evening and set about your true business. There's good and solid young ladies waiting this very minute for what I've given you. Be off," he thumped the table irritably, "and lay your head in the sensible comfort of a woman's breast. You have the look of one in want."

In all the children's characters, wayward though some of them were, there was a natural obedience to their father's force. Gomer put on his cap with a sulky look. Morfydd and Olwen went upstairs and, before the mirror, whispered and plotted with sisterly confidences, Caspar had already given them permission to go dancing. The younger children had listened to their father's homily with looks of close concentration; he had that way.

But this whipping up of his children did not really console him. He felt the angry dread which comes to an ambitious man when obstacles and setbacks appear undeserved on his path. He became more dejected and even cadaverous of face. He knew that the valley people were mocking him now, for though everybody had bought tickets for that performance of *Samson* in aid of him, people never really forgive a man who sits above them in any natural advantage, and their pleasure when he is brought low is extreme. Women said he was a bad example and had deserved that country redhead.

It was the dark night of his soul. He felt his life had come to a stop. There was no pleasure in the day's unroll. Yet, rousing himself, he took to attending—for Siân's perfidy had given him a distrust of the country parts—where people gather in the converse of local life, his roaming eye alert, his ear pricked. But the valley men had no information for him of ready young widow or spinster, and the women turned their faces from him. Besides, a man who divorces is not of best odour in the valley.

The year went by and the law still sat brooding over his divorce. His anguish grew; his sunken eye burned. Those three wasted

years were going into four. Must he come to a full stop, as people expected? No, no. He prayed in fierce language, but as week followed week and still no woman appeared on the horizon he began to shiver in the atheistic thoughts assailing him.

Taking a restless walk one Saturday afternoon, he found that his feet had brought him to where the trams stop and turn round, about three miles from his home. The cemetery gates were just above on the hillside. He stood on the kerb wondering why he had arrived here, where he hadn't been since burying Elizabeth. Was Elizabeth calling to him? He had walked here in his heavy grief without knowing where his feet led. Did she want to comfort him?

A tram clanked noisily to a standstill. A bunch of flowers in pink tissue paper rolled to his feet. Clumsily descending from the tram was a thick-set young woman in black; she was carrying two green tin vases, a little trowel, and a bag of bulbs. Her tidy round face was comfortably serious. And as Caspar handed her the flowers there was that in the look of their eyes which takes people back to when they were lizards without words. They went up into the cemetery together. The fine day was turning into November red.

Caspar's voice was famished and anxious: "My wife, the late Elizabeth Ann Beynon, is buried here." A young widow is she, he thought, her husband killed perhaps in that explosion in the pits down this district?

A flush ran in and out of her cheeks. She agitatedly dropped the tin vases. Looking at him sideways, her eyes were thick and soft as oil.

"You have buried your dear?" he urged at last, bold but sympathetic.

"My father," she breathed. Little bubbles appeared at the corners of her lips, which were cleft like a ripe peach.

They reached her father's grave. He leaned on the glistening marble headstone and, stooping, gazed into her drooped face. The strong red autumn sun was behind him like an ally. And though his gaze was vehement, the assault of his voice was smooth and subtle:

"Eighteen children I've got, by my late lying over by there. Eighteen, and all healthy and strong as new barrels. Likewise myself. Likewise you, if you are not minding these words. We

are full. Living we are. Feel my hand! The hand of a young man it is." He stooped lower and saw how her rich bosom was swelling in pain. "Think on this miracle! You and me, met together we have in this place of death, and one hour ago strangers! Surely a promise it is? Carrying bulbs you are? Fit and proper. Present moment we are as them. But in spring shall not a champion tulip bloom from us?"

Swaying lower, she would have fallen on the grave had not his strong arm held her, the tumult in her face was such. For he had accurately realised her dormant soul. He knew what he was about when he mentioned his previous eighteen. She, too, wanted abundance. Not for her the fear, the paltriness, and the niggard quarter-living of present day. Was that why she was still single?

"I," she said at last—and her voice was as if it had remained in long vigil deep inside her—"I have been waiting."

The sun's red cheek lay on the shoulder of old Iau Mountain when, at the keeper's bell, they came down among the thousand white stones. Caspar knew then that there is no more successful place for courting than a cemetery. Her name was Enid, aged twenty-six, and her late father, whom she had worshipped, had been carpenter in the Bwlch pits. Her mother was now wanting to go back to the country parts where she came from. Enid had no money, only herself, and Caspar preferred her without money.

Every Saturday until the divorce was granted they met safe in the cemetery. Alleys of yews and expensive tombstones hid them. She was not a talker. But he was, and, sitting by her father's grave, she listened with her full cleft lips parted moist. One Saturday he swept his arm towards the great crop of headstones, the crosses, the broken columns, the marble angels in doldrum attitudes, and said: "Concerned with such as these we are not. Stone we are? Angels that have done with the earth? Bones and a cup of dust? No! My late, lying over by there, is approving; sense she had and testify she would for me, could she. First-class condition I am in. And you?"

Her habit of blushing made her round face more sumptuous. "A doctor," she said shyly, "I have never had. There's nothing the matter with me."

"All the same," he said honestly, remembering the redhead, "a gamble you are."

The wind was howling loud through the darkening December

afternoon, pushing the yews and bumping against the headstones. They were the only people there. They did not hear the keeper's bell. And at the end of January she met him with a deeper blush on her face.

"It is done," she said, her drooped gaze on the young bulb blades in her father's grave.

In February the divorce was granted and the very next day Caspar led Enid by the hand into his home, she already in soft swell as he wanted her, and he a proud lesson to all slothful malingerers, dodgers, and bad characters. The eighteen, washed and in best clothes, were ranged up. Enid's round eyes were oily with emotion. She kissed the daughters and shook hands with the sons.

"The tea is ready," Morfydd said, stolid. "Shall I pour out or will you?"

They were married in a fortnight. Once more the newly washed lace festooned the bedroom and the shining rose-garlanded porcelain stood in its places, and the big shooting fern on its marble pillar. And down in No. 1 pit Caspar earned a new respect and those men who were of grave turn began to wonder if he really was Abraham born again.

He worked on the day shift. On an afternoon in the early autumn the telephone rang at the shaft bottom and the groundsman who answered called quick to a stableboy: "Go and find Caspar Beynon in the Wern drift. Tell him he's got to go home at once and it's important." The boy hung his lamp on his belt and went off into the workings.

Half an hour later women at their doors saw Caspar speeding down the hill and up again to his house. Even under the pit dirt they could tell his face was pale and haggard. No one could detain him. There was a little knot of women on the road outside his house; they talked in low, hushed voices, and as he ran inside their faces were grim.

That evening, when a reporter from the paper was present downstairs with several visitors and every one of the previous eighteen, Caspar appeared before them. In his arms were three glories. His eyes alight with triumphant pride, he said:

"Look! Look now! Three lost years have been given back to me! A miracle it is. Yet people there are who say there is no God."

And to Enid, privately and allowing himself a trim humour on this famous day, he said: "Well, Enid, my girl, surely a day in the cemetery is better than a month in the seaside?"

His fame increased. His history as father of twenty-one was related in the paper, together with all about that time when he had so bravely rescued Dai Dry Dock from under a fall of roof in the pits. Gifts were showered on him from mansion and cottage. Enid bore twice again, but one at a time. Then, strangely, she stopped. So the number remained at an aggravating twenty-three. But even in this there seemed a benevolent Will at work. For, after the last birth the bad times began and Caspar went on the dole like nearly all the valley miners. The earth was too crowded already and, it seemed, did not know what to do with all its sons and daughters.

However, by then Gomer, Morfydd, and Olwen, married to valley persons, began to produce. Every time a child was born to them he went down joyfully to the house concerned, carrying a small Bible, a loaf of home bread baked by Enid, and a bunch of flowers.

Wrath

I

BEFORE MATTHEW AT LAST DECIDED to marry her, Alice had sat for long, long years in a large box, giving out shilling tickets at the entrance lobby of the local cinema. At one time she possessed bright auburn hair of lively texture, and then quite suddenly, in a few weeks, a lot fell out in masses and what was left became drab. She was often in a state of roused indignation, and would then deny entrance to the cinema of many a collier if he appeared to be tipsy. She had joined the local women's Conservative Society for a couple of seasons, and the amiable lines of her well-knit body became slack and loose. And at the Pleasant Monday afternoon meetings in chapel she spoke with heat of this and that, denouncing things. But after a while, dissatisfied, she chucked all connection with such affairs and turned her gaze inwards, becoming morose and moody.

Cross as two sticks she went out for Sunday afternoon walks with Matthew and endeavoured to rouse him to awareness of her mind. Dutifully, on leaving her at evening, he pecked at her lips, and once, after a Boxing-Day performance of a Mendelssohn cantata, he had lingered at her bosom, sighing. After twelve years of such friendship they had married. She had never been pretty, and by that time she was plain. But there were always points like sparks somewhere behind her eyes, and often her slack body would turtle up, swell, and she seemed to thresh the air as if with wings, like a roused swan. Perhaps she never quite forgave Matthew for keeping her waiting so long.

He had never really wanted to marry and had kept the business at bay as long as possible. True, he thought of her desiringly at times, off and on between his passion for motor-bikes, toy-engines and wireless-sets. Then his mother had died and for a few months a succession of landladies had made life very uncomfortable. One morning, feeling a little aggrieved, he had taken Alice off to a registry office on the back of his motor-bike: he wanted no fuss, he said, being shy.

He had a round, plump face and his round, tight body always wore navy-blue serge suits and grey pin-spot ties. And he spoke in a tight, thin-lipped way, very smug. He had no male friends, but everybody recognised him as he went through the valleys on his collecting rounds: he was an insurance agent with quite a good book. His solid and safe demeanour persuaded people into the wisdom of taking policies. His favourite opening remark to a prospective client was:

"Life can be very cushy if you've a mind to make it so."

Soon he would be forty and the thought of it gave him satisfaction. To be middle-aged, with safe work, no worries and everybody convinced of their prudence in taking insurance policies, seemed to him the acme of comfort. In an upstairs back room of his house he made and repaired wireless-sets and now nearly all his spare time he spent closeted with valves and batteries. Alice would call him, angrily, to a meal or bed. She had a habit, when she called him thus, of hissing between her words. Hissing like a roused swan. Presently he would call out:

"All right, old girl, I shan't be long."

A steady, respectable chap, he could sleep like a hog, going to bed late from the intricacies of his wireless-sets.

II

He took to the pleasures of the table. But Alice was not really a satisfactory cook, or rather she was not interested in a gas-stove. He complained: she stiffened with anger. Then, one day three years after their marriage, Matthew, with astonished satisfaction, said at the dinner-table:

"This is a beautiful piece of steak. Lloyd's meat is improving."

Alice scooped more cabbage on to his plate. "More of these greens, dear," she murmured, "they'll do you good. I was going to give you beans today," she went on chattily and oddly good-humoured, "but the greens looked so fresh." Smoothly she continued to talk about vegetables. But Matthew, struck with the exceptional quality of the meat, kept talking of the butcher.

"Lloyd is pulling himself together again," he declared. "Very poor his stuff got after his wife died. Didn't care, I suppose, about his trade—went to pieces for a time."

Alice rose from the table, sniffing and saying that the rhubarb-pie was burning. She hastened into the scullery, where the gas-stove stood, and remained there several minutes. After banging the oven-door, she looked into the mirror over the sink, vaguely patting her hair. Her skin was yellowish, her mouth slack—she noted other details with a swift impatience. Only yesterday she had moved the mirror to a different position, but her appearance was no more flattering. However, before leaving the mirror she smiled at herself, a sprig of a smile, lean and secret. Then she pulled out the rhubarb-pie. It looked good. Undoubtedly she had produced a well-made dinner today: everything had gone delightfully.

Matthew thought it was a good meal too. He complimented Alice, saying that she was improving. After the meal he went, for the remainder of his dinner-session, to the back room where the wireless things were kept. At two-thirty he jumped on his motor-bike and went off on his collecting rounds. Alice took a short, sweet nap, which seemed to do her a lot of good, for her mouth was smiling when she woke.

And on Sunday Matthew sliced the joint with anticipatory pleasure. It was a leg of mutton, golden and russet and richly odorous. "Seems a rare piece," he remarked. Eating confirmed his judgment. The meat was excellent.

"I cooked the joint slower this time," Alice said, "and basted it more."

"I must run in and tell Lloyd," Matthew said, taking another slice. "I want to see him about a life-policy on his mother, too. He did all right on his wife's. Who would have thought she'd have gone off like that, so young, poor woman." He shook his head. "More meat, Alice, another slice? It's good, isn't it?"

"Give him time," Alice said. "It wouldn't be decent to go worrying him about policies so soon."

"A chap told me that he didn't seem to be grieving much. Been seen down at the dogs, and in the bus the other night he was fizzy as a glass of health-salts."

Alice said: "I wish you'd take a look at that mangle some time today, Matthew. The handle's all loose again."

He nodded, though usually he resented any effort to take him away from the wireless-room. And all day he was benign and willing. Once or twice he actually cocked an amorous glance across to Alice, aware of her. Vaguely he knew that she was different. Not that she had brushed her hair back, instead of parting it at the side, and that it was smarter. Nor the delicate scented powder that lay like a bloom on her skin—which until lately she had not bothered to conceal or adorn. He arrived at a conclusion. She was More Cheerful. But he did not attempt to discover the reason. He accepted the conclusion with satisfaction and mended the mangle. It had been bought secondhand the week they were married and during the five years following it had broken down every month or so.

Once again that week Matthew referred, over some veal, to the new delights of Lloyd's meat. He rose to a flight of imagination. "The calf that this came from," he vowed, "chewed cuds in Paradise." Alice told him not to be silly: the meat was only what it ought to be. Matthew remonstrated and she was obliged to admit that for a time Lloyd had not been a good butcher. Matthew reminded her that at one time they had almost decided to transfer their custom elsewhere. Only the hope that Lloyd might be persuaded to take out another insurance policy prevented them.

"Alice," he said suddenly, "you've took your eyebrows out!"

"Oh," she said offhandedly, "I made them a bit thinner, that's all."

"I liked them better bushy. It's no good," he went on, half jocular, half severe, "you trying to look like a jane off the pictures. You keep steady, old girl. I don't want you to go looking like a prize in a raffle. See!"

At the same time he was rather fascinated by her new oddness. That night he made love to her. He did not know why. But she spread a different warmth about her. True, he still scrambled through the business too hastily; and she dug her elbows painfully into his ribs, whether accidentallv or deliberately he could not tell. And for days following he was aware of her new warmth, though the fact did not penetrate to his mind. He merely found her more attractive to himself and acted accordingly, and blindly.

As for Alice, she bore with him inscrutably. She watched his plump face become plumper, she noticed his air of self-satisfaction becoming more complacent, more pronounced. Once or twice he tore himself from the wireless things and took her to the cinema. Sometimes he jovially tweaked her cheeks during the day, a new gesture from him.

III

Basket on arm, she went down to the butcher's. It was a corner shop and old-established. Bert Lloyd had succeeded to his father's business. He had put in a new façade and slabs of marble. Behind the shop, with an entrance in a lane, was an out-building which had been used as a slaughterhouse in the bad old days: neighbours used often to hear from there the dying bellows of bulls, the hysterical shrieks of stuck pigs. Now the slaughterhouse contained odd bits of furniture, thrown out of the Lloyd household above the shop: a chest of drawers, chairs, trunks and an old-fashioned horse-hair sofa, black, large and commodious. One day, after the death of his wife, Lloyd had put up a notice on his cash-desk: *Secondhand Sofa for Sale.* Alice had asked to see the sofa, thinking of a blank wall in her back parlour, and Lloyd had taken her into the slaughterhouse to see it.

Today she wore pearl-drop ear-rings as she entered the shop and carefully examined a tray of lamb chops. Lloyd was serving Mrs. Baptist Evans, the chapel minister's wife: she bought scrag

of mutton and complained that the liver he had sent her the day before was stringy. "Very bad," she said threateningly and loud enough for Alice to hear: she did not quite like Lloyd.

He grinned. Lloyd usually gave a grin to almost everything that was said to him. Perhaps it was a nervous grin. But he did not look nervous. Muscular and broad-beamed, he looked like a bantam boxer, and he had red cheeks, coarse hair and rolling eyes. A gaping youth of sheepish mien assisted in the shop.

Whistling cheerily as Mrs. Baptist Evans went out of the shop he grinned at Alice.

"These chops——" she said in a severe voice.

"Call 'em chops!" he sang. "They're bits of my old boots."

Thus he bantered with Alice. Occasionally, years ago, he used to flirt with her through the slot of the cinema pay-box, and at one time she had fancied he would go further. She had noticed his gross good looks, and she had found his impudent manner offensive one day, attractive another. But he had married May Roberts, a frail girl who, one would have said, was quite unsuited to him.

"Now then, George," he said to the boy breezily, "nip off to the bank and get five bobs' worth of coppers."

A collier's wife was hovering round the window outside, gazing shrewdly at the cheap meat. Lloyd began sharpening a knife, his powerful short arms dexterously wielding carver and steel. "Steak all right yesterday?" he grinned. Alice had to admit he owned dazzling teeth. She nodded.

"Made up your mind about the sofa yet?" he asked enjoyably.

Alice caught sight of her face in a mirror set in the marble between two dripping flanks of beef and decided she had dabbed on too much rouge. "No," she said.

"Want to see it again?"

The collier's wife was joined by a friend, and they stood gossiping on the pavement. George returned with the coppers and stood gazing into space, mouth open: he suffered from adenoids. Alice took two chops specially cut for her from a piece hanging in an unseen corner: with a flourish Lloyd entered the item in the ledger, grinning. She left the shop, hesitated on the corner, and then vaguely made her way towards the lane behind, which was also a short cut to her home.

The boy George served the collier's wife. She wanted a pound

and a half of the pieces of cheap steak. They were spread bloodily over a tray in bluish-red disorder.

"Where's the boss?" she demanded, scowling.

"Back soon, expect," George grunted. He plunged a raw hand deep into the mass of meat and tossed a great fistful upon grease-proof paper.

"Meat he calls his stuff," she said dourly. "You tell him, George, that Mrs. Evans said the kidneys was bad she had on Tuesday. A fork there is for using, too, boy," she grumbled.

"Hand's clean!" George replied in gaping surprise. He would never learn to use the fork. He placed the meat on the scales and lifted one chunk away, his red fingers closing on the grisly piece and then chucking it back on to the tray among the other sodden lumps.

"T't, t't, t't," clicked the collier's wife through her gums. She wore a scrap of old flannel across her shoulders and her used white face seemed already beyond the pleasures and torments of this world. "Treats the meat as if it was dirt," she scolded on wearily.

" 'Ow's Gwenny?" asked George suddenly, alluding to her daughter who had gone into service in London.

For some reason or other she took anger at his enquiry. "My daughter Miss Evans you mean? Now then, boy, hurry up. No time to waste I have."

When she had gone, George vaguely tidied the tray of steak, stuck in the price-ticket, and then stood, arms akimbo, staring out vacantly into the street.

IV

For two or three months affairs in the home continued to go smoothly. A wife who had suddenly blossomed like a rose, though with a mysterious air about her that was nevertheless oddly attractive; no more complaints about the time he spent in the wireless-room; contenting dinners. The clean-faced clock on the living-room mantelshelf, which had been a wedding-present, ticked out its seconds with a spick-and-span orderliness. Alice wore soft new poplin dresses at tea-time.

Matthew had induced many more people to take insurance policies. One of these was Lloyd. Matthew tackled him one

afternoon, going into the butcher's shop with a complimentary smile and beginning by praising the quality of the meat. But to his surprise Lloyd, whom he had imagined to be a happy-go-lucky chap about such things, put up no resistance, and bought a policy on his widow mother's life. But after all, Matthew thought, Lloyd had obtained a welcome sum on his late wife's policy and must have been convinced of the luck they brought.

So things were rosy. Prospering, Matthew bought expensive additions to his own complicated wireless-set and listened-in to exotic stations denied to ordinary sets. As Alice said, it would not be long before he reached Heaven itself and heard the voice of God thundering its judgments. She herself bought a gramophone with records that included fox-trots and sweet Chopin nocturnes: the jazz she played while washing the breakfast dishes, the Chopin in the quiet of her drowsy afternoons.

Matthew came to her more frequently still. Ambling to her side, he bristled with well-fed pleasure. She remained inscrutable concerning this development: she had the look of one reserving her mind. Sometimes she picked up his head off her chest by the ears and held it before her, like Salome, gazing with aloof mysteriousness into his stupid eyes.

One evening in September, just after they had sat down to supper, Matthew, exchanging the gossip of the day with Alice, inserted into his contributions, as he dabbed mustard on a cold sausage:

"Lloyd the butcher hasn't been long in taking a second helping, so I hear."

Alice sat like stone: Matthew was bent over his plate and, not receiving comment, went on:

"The barmaid of the Horse-shoe it's to be, they tell me. He's marrying her in time for the Christmas trade. . . . I wonder if he'll take a policy on her——"

Alice quivered into life. So *that's* what it was! Only yesterday she had had forebodings. Matthew was greedily taking another cold sausage: as usual, when stirred, she went into the scullery, stayed there a few minutes, and came back with a jelly. Redly rotund, Matthew's face beamed at her. Affectionately he called her 'old girl' twice during the remainder of the meal.

But things began to go wrong in the home. To begin with, Alice changed. Matthew became puzzled and, after a while,

really vexed. Having accustomed himself to the new warmth he had sensed in her, he now found her withdrawn in a dour isolation. And if that was not enough, the dinners began to be uneatable. Particularly the meat. Back to the old tough pieces they went, stringy, flavourless and drab. Matthew began to roar about this, while he sulked about the other.

"What's this stuff? I'm not a horse. Why don't you roast a piece of oak tomorrow? What you given me a knife for! An axe I want."

"I can't help it," Alice snapped. "That's the meat I get."

"If this goes on, Lloyd will lose our custom," he warned.

Which, as she knew, Lloyd desired. But daily she went to the shop. Lloyd grinned and, with astonishing sangfroid, treated her like any other customer, jauntily. She was just a name in his ledger. But by the bad pieces of meat he would recommend to her she knew he was stealthy and wanted to see her no more. And the youth George never left the shop while she was there. She became pale and fixed Lloyd with her glittering eyes: he vivaciously hacked a carcase, whistling. Happy in his new love for the barmaid, he was strong and merry as a coarse old ballad or a tankard of XXX ale. His bland wiliness made her thin with rage.

Matthew, his eyes popping, asked her if she was unwell.

"Yes, I am," she snapped. "I'm sick of this world."

"It's the only one we've got," he reminded her.

And sick she was. She had long recognised the desire for vengeance that was in her. She looked at him with hatred: she locked her door to him. Some days he was actively hostile and ordered her about as if she were a slovenly domestic; others he hid himself in his tight flesh and moved about the house as if she did not exist.

One Sunday he began carving the meat. It was a piece of beef. All that week the meat had been deplorable: Matthew had commanded Alice to shift her custom from Lloyd and buy the week-end joint elsewhere.

"Where did you get this piece?" he demanded suspiciously as he jabbed the fork into the beef.

"Lloyd's." She seemed to hurl the name at him like a clod of dirt.

"What did I tell you? Do you think I've got money to waste on stuff we can't eat!"

"Don't worry so much about your stomach," she said contemptuously.

He tasted a piece of the beef, grinding his jaws. The meat resisted his teeth. And because he wanted to blame her for other things, he said to her accusingly: "You must have done something to annoy Lloyd. What is it? He's a client of mine, and you should have kept in his good books."

Alice had not sat down at the table. She was going about the room with jerking movements, her elbows angular, her hands outstretched, the fingers quivering. Now she was silent, but her face burned. Incensed by her silence, he went on blaming her.

"You put on airs and annoy people. That's what it is. What d'you think you are? A lady? You're the wife of a working man and, by God, I'll keep you one." And in a crude effort to threaten her with humiliation, he promised: "I'll go to see that butcher tomorrow and ask if you've offended him. There must be something wrong for him to keep on sending us such meat."

He was seated now, bending over his plate. Arched and taut she crept behind him, snatched up the hot joint and brought it down on his head with majestic force. He yelped in surprise, then roared as the red and brown blood trickled over his face. But before he had time to rise from his chair she had swung the tough lump flat into his face.

She did not scream. But in a low agonised voice she hissed: "Take that. And that. And perhaps from now on you'll never talk of meat again." Then she threw the joint in grand contempt on to the table.

Matthew, blinded and sore from the hot impacts, clawed at his face. He stumbled into the scullery for a towel. By the time he had ragingly swerved back, Alice was upstairs locking the door of her room. Roaring, he thumped on the door. He heard her draw her suitcase from under the bed, he heard the wardrobe door flung back. He roared again. But his roars and thumps had no real body to them. He was wilting from the sacred and awful wrath that spread from Alice, through the door, the walls, down the stairs, through the whole Sunday afternoon silence of the house.

The Dark World

"WHERE CAN WE GO TONIGHT?" Jim asked. Once again it was raining. The rows of houses in the valley bed were huddled in cold grey mist. Beyond them the mountains prowled unseen. The iron street-lamps spurted feeble jets of light. There were three weeks to go before Christmas. They stood in a chapel doorway and idly talked, their feet splashed by the rain.

Thomas said: "There's someone dead up in Calfaria Terrace."

"Shall we go to see him?" Jim suggested immediately.

They had not seen any corpses for some weeks. One evening they had seen five, and so for a while the visits had lost their interest. When on these expeditions, they would search through the endless [illegible] of houses for windows covered with white sheets, the sign that death was within, and when a house was found thus, they would knock at the door and respectfully ask if they might see the dead. Only once they were denied, and this had been at a villa, not a common house. Everywhere else they had been taken to the parlour or bedroom where the corpse lay, sometimes in a coffin, and allowed a few seconds' stare. Sometimes the woman of the house, or maybe a daughter, would whisper: "You knew him, did you?" Or, if the deceased was a child: "You were in the same school?" They would nod gravely. Often they had walked three or four miles through the valley searching out these dramatic houses. It was Jim who always knocked at the door and said, his cap in his hand: "We've come to pay our respects, mum."

At the house in Calfaria Terrace they were two in a crowd. The dead had been dead only a day and neighbours were also paying their respects, as was the custom: there was quite a procession to the upstairs room. The corpse was only a very old man, and his family seemed quite cheerful about it. Thomas heard the woman of the house whisper busily on the landing to a neighbour in a shawl: "That black blouse you had on the line, Jinny, it'll be a help. The 'surance won't cover the fun'ral, and you know Emlyn lost four days in the pit last week. Still, gone

he is now, and there'll be room for a lodger." And, entreatingly: "You'll breadcrumb the ham for me, Jinny? . . . I 'on't forget you when you're in trouble of your own." The dead old man lay under a patchwork quilt. His face was set in an expression of mild surprise. Thomas noticed dried soapsuds in his ear. Four more people came into the bedroom and the two boys were almost hustled out. No one had taken any particular notice of them. Downstairs they asked a skinny, cruel-looking young woman for a glass of water and to their pleased astonishment she gave them each a glass of small beer.

"It didn't seem as though he was dead at all," Jim said, as if cheated. "Let's look for more. In November there's lot of them. They get bronchitis and consumption."

"It was like a wedding," Thomas said. Again they stood in a doorway and looked with vacant boredom through the black curtains of rain sweeping the valley.

"My mother had a new baby last night," Jim suddenly blurted out, frowning. But when Thomas asked what kind it was, Jim said he didn't know yet. But he knew that there were nine of them now, beside his father and mother and two lodgers. He did not complain. But of late he had been expressing an ambition to go to sea when he left school, instead of going to the colliery.

Jim, in the evenings, was often pushed out of home by his mother, a bitter black-browed woman who was never without a noisy baby. Jim's father was Irish, a collier of drunken reputation in the place, and the whole family was common as a clump of dock. Thomas's mother sometimes made one or two surprised remarks at his association with Jim. They shared a double desk in school. Occasionally Thomas expressed disgust at Jim's unwashed condition.

Again they set out down the streets, keeping a sharp look-out for white sheets in the windows. After a while they found a house so arrayed, yellow blobs of candle-light like sunflowers shining through the white of the window. Jim knocked and respectfully made his request to a big creaking woman in black. But she said gently: "Too late you are. The coffin was screwed down after tea today. Funeral is tomorrow. The wreaths you would like to see?"

Jim hesitated, looking back enquiringly over his shoulder at Thomas. Without speaking, both rejected the invitation, and

with mumbled thanks they backed away. "No luck tonight," Jim muttered.

"There was the small beer," Thomas reminded him. A wind had jumped down from the mountains and as they scurried on it unhooked a faulty door of a street-lamp and blew out the wispy light. When they had reached the bottom of the vale the night was black and rough and moaning, the rain stinging hot on cheeks and hands like whips. Here was a jumbled mass of swarthy and bedraggled dwellings. A spaniel, dragging her swollen belly, whined out to them from under a bony bush. She sounded lost and confused and exhausted with the burden that weighted her to earth. In the dark alley-ways they found a white sheet. A winter silence was here, the black houses were glossy in the rain. No one was about.

"Let's go back," whispered Thomas. "It's wet and late."

"There's one here," Jim protested. "After coming all this way!" And he tapped at the door, which had no knocker.

The door was opened and in a shaft of lamplight stood a man's shape, behind him a warm fire-coloured interior, for the door opened on to the living-room. Jim made his polite request, and the man silently stood aside. They walked into the glow.

But the taste of death was in the house, true and raw. A very bent old woman in a black cardigan, clasped at her stringy throat with a geranium brooch, sat nodding before the fire. Thomas was staring at the man, who had cried out: "It's Thomas!" He sat down heavily on a chair. "Oh, Thomas!" he said in a wounded voice. His stricken face was as though he were struggling to repudiate a new pain. A tall, handsome man, known to Thomas as Elias, his face had the grey, tough pallor of the underground worker.

The boy stood silent in the shock of the recognition and the suspicion prowling about his mind. He could not speak, he dare not ask. Then fearfully the man said:

"You've come to see Gwen, have you? All this way. Only yesterday I was wondering if your mother had heard. You've come to see her?"

"Yes," Thomas muttered, his head bent. Jim stood waiting, shifting his feet. The old woman kept on nodding her head. Her son said to her loudly, his voice sounding out in suffering, not having conquered this new reminder of the past years: "Mam,

this is Thomas, Mrs. Morgan's boy. You remember? That Gwen was so fond of."

The old woman dreadfully began to weep. Her face, crumpled and brown, winced and shook out slow, difficult tears. "Me it ought to have been," she said with a thin obsession. "No sense in it, no sense at all."

Thomas glanced secretly at Elias, to see if his emotion had abated. Three years ago he used to carry notes from Elias to Gwen, who had been the servant at home. It seemed to him that Elias and Gwen were always quarrelling. Elias used to stand for hours on the street corner until he came past, hurry up to him and say hoarsely: "Thomas, please will you take this to Gwen." In the kitchen at home, Gwen would always toss her head on the receipt of a note, and sometimes she indignantly threw them on the fire without reading them. . . . But Gwen used to be nice. She always kept back for him, after her evening out, some of Elias's chocolates. Once or twice she had obtained permission to take him to the music-hall and gloriously he had sat between her and Elias, watching the marvellous conjurors and the women in tights who heaved their bejewelled bosoms as they sang funny songs. But Elias, he had felt, had not welcomed those intrusions. After a long time, Gwen had married him. But before she left to do this, she had wept every day for a week, her strong, kind face wet and gloomy. His mother had given her a handsome parlour clock, and Gwen had tearfully said she would never wind it as it would last longer if unused. Then gradually she had disappeared, gone into her new married life down the other end of the valley.

Elias looked older, older and thinner. Thomas kept his gaze away from him as much as possible. He felt shy at being drawn into the intimacy of all this grief. The old woman kept on quavering. At last Elias said, quietly now: "You will come upstairs to see her, Thomas. And your friend." He opened a door at the staircase and, tall and gaunt, waited for them to pass. Thomas walked past him unwillingly, his stomach gone cold. He did not want to go upstairs. But he thought that Elias would take a refusal hardly. Jim, silent and impassive, followed with politely quiet steps.

In a small, small bedroom with a low ceiling two candles were burning. A bunch of snowy chrysanthemums stood on a table

beside a pink-covered bed. Elias had preceded them and now he lifted a starched white square of cloth from off the head and shoulders of the dead.

She was lying tucked in the bed as if quietly asleep. The bedroom was so small there was nowhere else to look. Thomas looked, and started with a terrified surprise. The sheets were folded back, low under Gwen's chest, and cradled in her arm was a pale waxen doll swathed in white. A doll! His amazement passed into terror. He could not move, and the scalp of his head contracted as though an icy wind passed over it. Surely that wasn't a baby, that pale stiff thing Gwen was nursing against her quiet breast? Elias was speaking in a hoarse whisper, and while he spoke he stroked a fold of the bed-clothes with a grey hand.

"Very hard it was, Thomas, Gwen going like this. The two of them. I was in the pit, and they sent for me. But she had gone before I was here, though old Watkins let me come in his car. . . . I didn't see her, Thomas, and she asked for me——" His voice broke, and Thomas, in his bout of terror, saw him drop beside the bed and bury his face in the bed.

It was too much. Thomas wanted to get away; he wanted to run, away from the close narrow room, from the man beside the bed, from the figure in the bed that had been the warm Gwen, from the strange creature in her arm that looked as though it had never been warm. The terror became a nightmare menace coming nearer . . . Unconsciously he jerked his way out to the landing. Jim followed; he looked oppressed.

"Let's clear off," he whispered nervously.

They went downstairs. The old woman was brewing tea, and in the labour seemed to forget her grief. "You will have a cup," she enquired, "and a piece of nice cake?"

At this Jim was not unwilling to stay, but Thomas plucked his sleeve. Elias's heavy step could be heard on the stairs. Then he came in, quiet and remote-looking. He laid his hand on Thomas's shoulder for a second.

"Do you remember when we used to go to the Empire, Thomas? You and Gwen used to like that Chinaman that made a white pigeon come out of an empty box."

But Thomas saw that he was not the same Elias who, though he would wait hours for the indifferent Gwen like a faithful dog, had been a strutting young man with a determined eye. He was

changed now, his shoulders were slackened. She had defeated him after all. Thomas sipped half a cup of tea, but did not touch the cake. He scarcely spoke. Elias kept on reminding him of various happy incidents in the past. That picnic in the mountains when Elias had scaled the face of a quarry to fetch a blue flower Gwen had fancied. "Didn't she dare me to get it!" he added, with a strange chuckle in his throat. "And then she gave it to you!" He sat brooding for a while, his face turned away. Then, to Thomas's renewed terror, he began to weep again, quietly.

The mother, hobbling across to her son, whispered to the two boys. Perhaps they would go now. It was only yesterday her daughter-in-law had died, and the blow was still heavy on her son. She had stiffened herself out of her own abandonment to grief. The boys went to the door in silence. Jim looked reserved and uncommenting.

Outside, in the dark alley, he said: "I wonder how she came to chuck the bucket! The baby was it?" Receiving no reply, he added with something like pride now: "My mother's always having them, but she's only abed for three days, she don't die nor nothing near it." Thomas still stumbling silently by his side, he went on: "Perhaps he'll marry again; he's only a young bloke. . . . I never seen a man cry before," he added in a voice of contempt.

But for Thomas all the night was weeping. The dark alley was an avenue of the dead, the close-shuttered houses were tombs. He heard the wind howling, he could feel the cold ghostly prowling of the clouds. Drops of icy rain stung his cheeks. He was shivering. Gwen's face, bound in its white stillness, moved before him like a lost, dead moon. It frightened him, he wanted to have no connection with it; he felt his inside sicken.

"Shall we look for more?" Jim said. A roused, unappeased appetite was in his voice.

Thomas leaned against the wet wall of a house. Something broke in him. He put up his arm, buried his head in it, and cried. He cried in terror, in fear and in grief. There was something horrible in the dark world. A soft, howling whine came out of his throat. Jim, ashamed, passed from wonder into contempt.

"What's up with you!" he jeered. "You seen plenty of 'em before, haven't you? . . . Shut up," he hissed angrily. "There's someone coming," And he gave Thomas a push.

Thomas hit out. All the world was threatening and hostile. The back of his hand caught Jim sharply on the cheekbone. Immediately there was a scuffle. But it was short-lived. They had rolled into a pool of liquidly thin mud, and both were surprised and frightened by the mess they were in.

"Jesus," exclaimed Jim, "I'll cop it for this."

Thomas lurched away. He stalked into the rough night. All about him was a new kingdom. Desperately he tried to think of something else. Of holidays by the sea, of Christmas, of the nut-trees in a vale over the mountains, where, too, thrushes' nests could be found in the spring, marvellously coloured eggs in them. Jim, who had seen him weep, he thought of with anger and dislike.

At the top of the hill leading to his home he paused in fear. The bare high place was open to the hostile heavens, a lump of earth open like a helpless face to the blows of the wind and the rain. He heard derision in the howls of the wind, he felt anger in the stings of the rain.

The Trip to London

MAGNIFICENTLY SHE TOOK HER SEAT in the compartment, a fine, sunlike woman simmering with well-being and physical vigour. The atmosphere of rich profusion she brought with her was accentuated by the shower of travel comforts she dropped to the seat—glossy magazines, sweets, cigarettes, bags of fruit. A luxuriant fur bristled over her amazonian shoulders, her hands sparkled with rings, a dazzling brooch lay in her bosom. At first glance she looked like a prosperous barmaid of the traditional good-hearted type. She was about forty, though her complexion was a young girl's.

No one could remain neutral or indifferent in her presence. She was of those who are the first to break up the cautious silence of a railway carriage. "Well," she exclaimed, settling, "that's over! I always enjoy a trip to London but it's nice to be going home again. A week of it is enough for me. . . . And

the money!" At this last exclamation she bared her eyes in mock terror. They were unexpectedly black and small. And in them was a momentary whip, a flicking out of something baleful. No doubt she could be a tartar when roused.

She opened her glossy handbag, took out a black cigarette-case and a lighter to match. Everything looked new and shining—the handbag, the fur, her clothes, the rakish hat perched on the freshened blonde hair. "The things I've bought! I run wild in shops, that's a fact." Her gaze kept on darting as if expectantly towards the platform.

"You ladies," jocularly remarked the tall man, "go rampaging in the shops, while we men, God knows why, kill ourselves making what goes into them."

"I never bring the wife to London if I can help," said the stout man lugubriously. "There's nothing you can't get at home at half the price."

"Oh, you men!" she glowed. "Always wanting to tie us up at home, so mean."

And, still smoking a cigarette, she opened a packet of sweets and popped a piece of turkish delight into her mouth. Then, delving again into the crowded handbag, she extracted a lapis lazuli case and unnecessarily powdered her nose. There was something released and holiday about all her actions. She was a pleasure to watch.

A man had kept on passing the shut door. He looked into the compartment yet again, came back, and entered. He was slight, middle-aged and of respectable appearance, neatly dressed and with a narrow, indecisive face. He settled himself nervously opposite the big sunlike woman. She took up one of her magazines and flicked over its pages. At the same time she was saying to the stout man, giving him a challenging dart from her eyes:

"But thank goodness *I* can't be kept at home any longer. I'm a widow and I live alone. I've got a cosy home but I won't be locked up in it any more. I go out enjoying myself in the shops, money though it costs."

The newcomer had the disadvantage of entering a compartment where the other three occupants had already made amiable contact. But he did not look a person who wished to join in the friendliness. Except for the jumpy face he was nondescript. He seemed a man who wished to dwindle out of notice. Yet he kept

on looking at the woman in a kind of half-hidden anguish. She radiated such full pleasure in her secure place in the world.

"Why is it," the tall man still jocularly mourned, "we men sweat to make money only to let women treat it like water?"

She bustled enjoyably. "We women want to know why too, you see!" Putting her head on one side, that black gaze darted out baleful at him. "Perhaps it's because there's not enough in men to please us, and we've got to have something else. . . . I bought a silver cake-stand in Regent Street," she went on, inconsequent, "though I've got two already."

"It's queer," lamented the tall man, "but men do get fascinated by a woman that spends his money *ad lib*—yes, fascinated, like they say a bird does by a snake."

"Women," she pointed out, "got their advantages for you, haven't they? We soothe you, don't we give you home comforts, don't we put you poor cold creatures to sleep nice and comfortable?"

And her splayed fingers, with a languid ladylike gesture, took another sweet. She then vivaciously changed her magazine and pretended to peep at its pictures. Not once did she look at the slight, wincing man sitting opposite her—perhaps because he rarely moved his eyes from her face.

It was true that she subsided into silence for quite a good part of the two hour journey. But it was a silence radiating a tropical liveliness. Continually she smoked, ate, or passed rapidly from magazine to magazine. Her strong but soft-looking jaws, ceaselessly obliterating sweets, moved rhythmically as the train's wheels. Now and again she placed a hand, blind in its plump fleshiness, on her bosom and fumbled for the large brooch dripping with blue, red and lurid green clusters of imitation jewels.

The two men who had conversed with her rustled newspapers in clouds of pipe smoke. Married-looking and matured, they glanced at her now and again with a wary pleasure, delighting but also critical in her rich spread of gewgaws, eatables and frivolous women's journals. But the other man, slunk so wornly in his corner, still did not spread himself with this satisfaction. Behind the spellbound gaze of his eyes he appeared to writhe in apprehension. He gave off an atmosphere of one who in whimpering loneliness prowls about the edges of other people's happiness. But still she did not look at him.

"I went to the Zoo," she prattled suddenly. "I saw the lions and tigers. They're pretty."

"Pretty!" repeated the stout man in surprise. "Do man-eaters look pretty?"

"I dare say," flirted the tall man, "you find men are more like kittens than like lions."

"Oh, I don't know," she smiled luxuriantly. "I've only been married once. I lead a very quiet life. A shopping trip to London, that's all I get out of life now."

The slight man opposite her listened to this with an awareness wistful in its intensity. Why did he not join in the conversation, was he defeated by some hungry shyness, waiting for her to look at him and to part that pink mouth in a smile for him alone? She did not do so. Instead she ate the last of her victuals—a most expensive-looking hot-house peach. She bit into its golden and rosy flesh with a relish at once greedy and delicate, dabbing at her chin and lips with a scrap of chiffon handkerchief.

It was too much for him. He closed his hypnotised eyes at last, he seemed to squirm down into himself, utterly routed.

"Well, we're drawing near," she gurgled. "Home! Oh, I'm looking forward to my own fireside. . . . Drizzling rain as usual. Sooty too," she said, not without approval. "I must say it's nice to smell a bit of our own city soot."

Out in the autumn dusk lay the factories, the lurking smoke, the crush of dwellings and the great black roads. There were the grunting iron-chested engines, the chimney-stacks and the stern concrete yards. Out there was work and the day-after-day monotony. . . . But she, she would shine and sparkle over these things and obliterate them. The train glided to a standstill. She arranged her fur, stepped out with quite a curt *Good evening* and refused a porter for her suitcase. And all light seemed to leave the carriage.

The slight man roused himself, jumped. Suddenly he hurtled himself out of the carriage and hurried down the platform, a chiffon handkerchief in his hand.

"You left this handkerchief behind." There was a little nervous yelp in his voice.

She bent her glowing head down towards him; she smiled. And in her black eyes leapt that little whip-like flame. "Now

that's kind of you! . . . You're the quiet gentleman that sat opposite me. Did I disturb you? I'm such a chatterbox."

The station's black façade towered over them like some entrance to the underworld. They stood there in its gritty maw. It was final, the frightening and agonised last moment. He said, in a vanquished yelp: "Can we take some refreshment together?" A tram-car clanked and screeched somewhere. People sped blackly through the drizzle. A faint odour of violets coming off her, she bent her head to him again. She smiled, fully and glitteringly.

It was then he saw, in the whirring lights of cabs and buses, that she had two rows of dead-white false teeth. Somehow—perhaps it was because of their cheapness—they gave him courage. "Please do," he wheedled, but with decision. "Look, we can go in there! They have a quiet lounge, very select."

"I don't mind if I do," she said comfortably.

They sat under an immense palm, on bony tubular chairs before a table of beetroot-coloured wicker. A melancholy old waiter brought her a port, him a whisky. Two dahlias were purply dying in a vase between them; two commercial travellers, the only other customers, held bored conference on stools at the bar. He said: "I don't mind telling you, if you don't mind listening, that I've fallen for you."

"Now then!" she tittered. "That's not how a man of your sense should speak. . . . But perhaps you're a bit lonely——"

"I am," he replied, his fingers beating a tattoo on the table. And he launched at once into particulars of himself. He was an agent for manufacturing engineers and was often away from home. He was unhappy with his wife and she with him; they hadn't spoken properly for months. She didn't care a scrap what he did. There were no children. He was sick to death of his monotonous work; he had a bit of money put by. But he never mentioned his name or where he lived. The commonplace recital was jerked out anxiously but it sounded like truth.

"You want to take a holiday from your troubles," she said kindly. "You're not well, I can see. It just shows you that money can't buy everything."

She seemed to bend over him in amplitude, gather him up, and at the same time obliterate him in the wealth of her bosom. For, strangely enough, his achievement in getting her to sit there

with him sociably did not solidify him. He seemed to wilt, under the sprouting palm, though when ordering drinks he was lordly enough with the waiter padding about vaguely on his slouching old feet.

She met him by appointment the following evening in the city, having formally invited him to supper. But she had told him he would never find her house alone. And they must arrive after dark; the world was so full of unjust tongues. He was not allowed to take a cab even tonight. The tram-car was almost full; she would not let him sit with her. The tram lines ended in a desolate half-built housing estate which seemed bitten rawly out of the land. A faint uneasy scent of the open country blew round the unlit corners.

He followed her down a new asphalt road. Unfinished houses loomed on either side. A steam-roller, red light on the ground before it, stood massive; the road ended with abrupt finality. There seemed no more houses or people. She waited and, slinking and shadowy in his dark overcoat, he drew abreast with her.

"We can walk together now," she whispered. "We've half a mile to go yet. . . . I warned you!"

"I don't mind," he said doggedly.

"They're spoiling the country," she prattled. "When I was a girl I used to come out here picking blackberries. . . . Still, it all makes money. I've been thinking of taking a little shop on this estate. But it needs a bit more capital than I've got."

At the bottom of a dropping lane edged with iron railings and withering thorn bushes they came to a dim stretch of country smelling of marsh and dank vegetation. "There's ponds here," she said. "Some of them are deep. . . . It's not far now. My husband owned land down here; a pity it wasn't up on the estate—I would be rich now." For the first time there was a hard rasping note in her voice.

They had passed a couple of dark, silent bungalows. The marshy odour, of reeds in rot and stagnant autumnal water, was not oppressive. In summer the place would sprout in steamy florescence and the air would be like jelly. A distance beyond the ponds a road hummed with cars and lorries; it was the arterial. "You can get buses there," she said. "This lane leads out to it between the ponds."

"The whole of England is cut up," he yelped. "People and noise are never far off. Roads, roads everywhere, and networks of wires above. It's a regular web."

"There are quiet corners," she answered, in a soothing way, "where you can still rest peaceful. . . . There's my house."

Unlatching a gate she went with her full-rigged assurance across a garden. An earthy smell of many coarse bushes hung in the dark. The low moaning hum of the cars had taken away the sense of lonely isolation. A dog barked. The dim house looked like a Victorian villa, brave in its aim at grandeur. There was a deep porch above a flight of steps flanked with urns.

"You'll be ready for your supper," she said; "I've laid it."

She opened a dark door.

"I always say," she smiled, "that a trip to London does you good."

She looked out of the cab window into the wintry afternoon street. At a traffic stop the soft yellow illumination of a jeweller's window changed her happy gaze into a childishly greedy snatching. "Oh!" she cried, "all that gold! . . . People are rich."

"My trip's done *me* good, anyhow," said the man beside her. "When I said to myself on the ship: 'I'll be in London for Christmas,' I didn't think I was going to get such a present as meeting you."

"Oh," she expanded, "am I a present? I began to think I was an expense to you. . . . I do feel mean," she added, in pouting self-reproach, "but you understand, don't you, that I'm not a woman like that?"

"You're a *friend*," he said, loyally and with simple submission. "I'm no great shakes as a chap, I know—only an old crock from the tropics. I don't expect more than friendship, see!" His round, wondering face, like an oddly-matured adolescent's—for he was well into middle age—was pasty and flaccid. The tropical sun had not made him lean and wizened; it had only demolished hard bone and muscle. "When I saw you sitting in that sedate hotel," he went on, "enjoying your meal, I said to myself: 'That's a woman I'd like to know; there's no nonsense about her.' "

"I do enjoy myself," she admitted. Between them on the seat were a number of parcels, paper satchels and magazines. She stroked her fur coat lovingly. "Oh, I'll have to go careful next

year. . . . Seventy pounds this coat cost!" she said in a hushed but gleeful way.

"Why, that's not so bad, surely?" he said with some swagger.

Her black flicking eyes peeped round at him. "Don't you think so?"

Walking down the platform of the railway station, glistening and magnificent in her coat, she said: "But I'm always glad to go home, I'm a woman for my own fireside. I've got a cosy little place, though I say it."

"Home!" he sighed, trotting short and flaccid at her side like a plump schoolboy. "I lost mine when I was seventeen. That's what made me go to the East. I haven't a single relation left now. I'm just an orphan." A helpless little waif of humanity he seemed, trotting there by her side.

After selecting her seat and dropping the numerous parcels she came back to him on the platform. "Never mind!" she leant down towards him—"You're coming to see me, aren't you? You promise? And you've got the arrangements clear?"

"Clear as daylight," he assured with damp ardour. "I wish I was coming now."

"Yes, a pity it isn't convenient for me today. But, good gracious, tomorrow will soon be here. I'll have a nice supper ready for you.

Doors were slamming. The air quivered with a sense of finality, of farewells and decisive movement. Now she stood leaning out over him from the carriage window. He laid his hand yearningly over hers. She shone down on him from among an odour of carnations. But already her imminent departure was draining him of such colour and vitality as she had shed on him in the cab. He wilted in grief and mumbled: "I shan't eat till that supper tomorrow night!"

"Till tomorrow, then!" she sang from the gliding train.

There was no one of interest to her in the carriage: three women and the husband—no doubt of it—of one of them. She shut them out of her gaze relentlessly, though all were interested in the splendour of her settling to the journey, the dazzling glow of her presence, the profusion of her trinkets and parcels. Here was the good, healthy, middle-class heart of a country, well-off and assured, the daughter of a successful civilisation. She was a nation in herself. Before the train was well out of the station

she was eating, brought for her by a laden ship triumphantly cleaving the seas of the world, a rosy Empire apple.

Presently she took from her handbag a folded newspaper bought in the London hotel. It had been published in her native city. And she read again:

Disappearance of Local Man

Concern has been expressed at the disappearance of Mr. James Waite of Hill Avenue, who has not been seen or heard of for two months. His wife, Mrs. Hilda Waite, fears he has lost his memory and states that her husband, a highly respected member of a City firm, suffered from a slight nervous breakdown some months ago, due to overwork. The mystery is complicated by the fact that when last heard of Mr. Waite drew from his bank two substantial sums of money within a week. The missing man is aged 47, of slight build and medium height. Anyone who may have information of him is asked to communicate with the Central Police Station.

This is the second disappearance of local business men in recent months. The case of Mr. R. Tibble, a loyal and highly esteemed member of a well-known hardware house, will be recalled. Mr. Tibble has never been traced.

Suddenly it was as if a thunderous cloud passed over her face. She looked up, her black gaze thrashing across to the man sitting by his wife's side opposite her.

"This carriage is a non-smoker!" she reminded him haughtily.

"I beg your pardon," he said, and put out his cigarette.

Opening a paper satchel she selected a piece of turkish delight and passed on to other items in the newspaper. Shortly afterwards she began dipping into the many magazines strewn beside her. A blank silence, decreed by her, reigned in the compartment.

The wintry dusk was closing. Through it the train hurled its way to the industrial city whose toiling men and machines manufactured so many of the necessities of modern comfort. But she, she was taking to it warmth and seductive colours. She looked mollified now, reposed in her grandeur of flesh. She ate sweetmeats, grinding them rhythmically in her soft but powerful jaws. She shut herself in her luxurious fur coat, ignoring the other passengers again, never once offering magazine or sweet to the other women.

They, neatly turned out in unremarkable garments, eyed with distrust this dynamo in the corner. The hand of the wife stole in protection to her husband's and patted it—perhaps to soothe him after the snub he had received. For he was certainly looking uneasily roused.

The Last Struggle

GRIEF FOR THE NEWLY-DEAD is natural in the living and thought of legacies and insurance money to be drawn from them comes second in most persons. Megan Pugh, wife of Sam Two Fingers, thought of the insurance on her husband first, that day when the pit under-manager came to her in person and sat in her kitchen telling her that all hope of rescuing Sam and the other two entombed miners had been abandoned. Megan managed to pull a face. But already her mind was wandering in speculation. A pity she would have to wear black for a time. There was a cerise dress in the window of Lewis Paris House that she madly coveted.

"The water it is," mourned Mr. Rowlands; "they must have been drowned." He avoided even thinking that the three men were very likely more horribly obliterated; drowning sounded ordinary. "Can't get at them," he mumbled, "for weeks, p'raps never. Blocks of stone nearly as big as a house and water running under all the time; might cause a flood of the mine if we blast the stone." There had been a big collapse of roof four days before; four days the men had been entombed.

Fifty pounds Sam was insured for, with the Globe and Atlas people, whose New Year gift calendar was on the wall; and of course there would be the compensation money from the pit too. She could go to the seaside; she could even live away from the valley at last. And why should she wear black! Black made her look sallow.

Perhaps, in a way, it was only natural that Megan should be so unnatural. Sam had always kept her short of money; you couldn't hold him off the dogs, though much of a drinker he was not and he had never hit her. He was known as Sam Two

Fingers because after a previous accident in the pit one hand was left with the other fingers gone. The strange thing was those two fingers developed a peculiar iron grip.

Only a few months after she had married him—a couple of years ago it was they had hurried to the chapel—she felt it was a mistake; a false alarm the wedding had been. As a courter he had strutted cockily at her side and she took it as pleasure in being in her company. As a married man he had got bossy at once and, when she complained that he was never in the house, answered: "You can't bring a dog race to the house, can you? Don't I sleep tidy at home every night? What more you want?"

She wanted to be taken about by him, she wanted clothes and train journeys; she did not want to become like the dumpy women of the valley, who only left their doors to go to the shops and the chapel. They had quarrelled like hell. But even in those two years she had been defeated. The valley was a man's valley, with pubs, clubs, dog tracks and football grounds for men only. Perhaps this would change if women went down to work in the pits. But not yet.

"The Company will give you compensation, I dare say," Mr. Rowlands mumbled in embarrassment, thinking her far-away look meant shock or worry.

"How much?" she asked.

Mr. Rowlands shook his head. "An inquest and an enquiry there'll have to be before anything is settled." He was tired and grey from the worry, but tough from long experience of these incidents. Thank goodness, though, Sam Two Fingers's wife didn't make a scene, as some wives did, especially the young ones. He heaved himself up to make the other two calls with the sad news. In their black tomb the men were lying beyond the fret of the living, sealed away for ever from the numerous details and costs of this world. Megan Pugh had sense. She did not cry out for the remains to be found and re-buried in a proper funeral.

Megan locked her front door after him. She did not want neighbours coming in to condole. There were many things to plan. She was tied in no way. Not a child to delay her. The empty days were over. Next morning she was up early and by half-past nine was sitting in a tram-car which linked the districts, colliery by colliery, of the long crab-coloured valley. The July sun shone. It would be nice by the sea if this weather kept.

At the valley's end, in a cottage overlooking the railway, she knocked at a door. It belonged to her Uncle Dai, a greaser on the railway and a private bookie. Dai was no fool with his money but could be persuaded. His wife made a cup of tea when she heard the news and, taking her cue from Megan's lack of tearful display, asked: "What your plans now?" For Megan still had a gloss on her, knew how to wear a hat, and was a good-looker with skin and teeth still fresh as daisies.

"A little rest straight away," Megan replied; "a little rest by myself in Weston-super-Mare, to think things out."

"Get married more careful next time," Dai's wife said shrewdly.

"I've been locked up!" Megan said with violence.

"Aye, a regular old Tory your Sam was. A wife was set final for him and couldn't be broke away."

Dai came in for his dinner at twelve. He made more money as a quiet bookie than as a greaser and did not dislike his niece. Megan produced the insurance book out of her bag and all the weekly payments for Sam were down regular.

"And there's the compensation from the pit too," she added. "Mrs. Bevan near me had a couple of hundred pounds when her Emlyn got killed."

She was asking her uncle for an immediate loan of fifty pounds, since very likely, what with inquests and fusses, it would be a week or more before the insurance people paid out. For this favour she was willing to pay him two pounds interest. He could keep the insurance book for security and she would see the insurance agent and tell him that her Uncle Dai was handling her affairs. She wanted to go to Weston-super-Mare without delay; her nerves were upset from the shock.

The chance of making a couple of pounds on such a certain deal made even Dai joke: "A fancy piece of goods in trousers you got in Weston-super-Mare, Megan? Well, well——"

So, bad though it looked, she skulked off the next day. She took train to the seaside town the other side of the Bristol Channel, did not jib at the high charge in a boarding-house, and then went at once to the drapers' shops and spent ten pounds in an hour. Her most daring purchases, owing to their colour, were a scarlet frock with handbag to match. For three days she lived in the shops and began to believe in happiness again. It was not until the Sunday that she felt appeased and, examining the beach and pier, began

to wonder if she had come to the English town to look at men who did not work down under. For she would never marry another miner, coming home black and bellicose from dirty pits.

Weston-super-Mare, in the season, is bright. She sat eating striped ice-cream and one afternoon she went to Cheddar to visit the famous caves. She kept herself to herself but noticed a man looking at her instead of at the crystal grottoes and stalactites. And in the coach going back there he was sitting next to her! They got talking. He said he was from Birmingham, but he belittled the caves and said there were much finer ones in India.

A quiet-looking chap he was, chatting quite sedate. Malaria had sent him back from India. He was an electrician and had a job in a Birmingham factory now. His lean, lonely appearance was of one who wants looking after, but he ushered her out of the high plush coach with polite confidence. She accepted his invitation to take a glass of something in the lounge of a hotel on the front.

At the end of the second week she told him, grandly: "I am a widow. Husband killed in the pits at home. But I got a bit of property. Independent." She wished to be respected and she sounded short.

"Well," Ted Cricks said, "that's fine. Look here, I got to go back on Monday. But I dare say I could do a week-end soon as you get home, if asked. Is there a pub I could stay at there?"

She got a bit flustered, thinking of the neighbours. But, sitting on a golden beach with the sky blue and music coming from the pier, the world seemed easy. The tide was rolling in, moving with dark but careless force. She gave him her address and invited him for a week-end. He could sleep at her Uncle Dai's. He said he would wire her from Birmingham.

"Back soon, lovely weather," was all she had said on the postcard she had sent to Uncle Dai. Forty pounds had been spent and her new suitcase was full. She stayed a few more days. After all, there was the compensation money to come, and she had a houseful of furniture, to say nothing of a promising courter from Birmingham.

On the way back she stopped in Cardiff for an hour and drank three ruby ports in farewell of the triumphant holiday. Wearing the red dress she arrived in the valley at dusk with three pounds in the handbag. But she tossed her head at the valley and admired

herself for the flaunting display she was making. It was time some woman showed a respect for her own wants in this place. She did not care what the neighbours, stern guardians of the inexorable laws of the hearth, would think of the gay clothes. Sam wasn't worth mourning, the way he had treated her. She had a good mind to march into a pub there and then and scandalise those entirely male haunts.

As it happened there was no one about in her street. Preened and sunburnt, she unlocked her door. In the dusky passageway she paused just behind the door. Was that the sound of mice? Then her head hung forward and she dropped her red handbag.

The kitchen door at the end of the passage was slowly opening. A two-fingered hand came round it. She could see it distinctly in the twilight. But she could not scream. Her knees like water, she went squatting to the floor. But her face was stretched up, stiffly gazing. The door had been pushed wide open and the ghost of Sam, grey and silent, stood looking at her.

Just the same as when he sat before the fire for a while after his evening bath, before going off to the dogs, he wore trousers and sleeve-rolled shirt, a loose belt round his middle. But his cheeks were hollow and his eyes burned. It was Sam and it wasn't. And from the look of those smouldering eyes she could not move. They stood looking at each other for an age. Suddenly the ghost breathed, far away:

"You get up from there!"

"Sam. . . ." she whimpered at last.

"I'll Sam you!" he panted now. "I'll give you Weston-super-Mare. . . ." But she had fainted.

To her dying day Megan thought she would never forget those two fingers coming round the door. It had burned into her mind. She found herself lying on the kitchen sofa. The strange thing was that he did not attack her either with tongue or hand. He only looked at her now and again. But for her it was a dead man looking at her. He was still grey from his burial, and thinner, and in his eyes lurked that stagnant glow of one not yet fully back in the world.

"You . . ." she whispered, "you were rescued?"

"Aye, I was rescued," he replied, stern. "The only one."

For, when the cracks had sounded in the roofing, he had leapt to a manhole in the facing, a pick-axe in his hand. Two huge

blocks of stone from the falling roof had sealed him in there neatly as in an upright coffin. He heard the rush of water and waited to be choked. But the water found a channel away from the manhole and it had faded to a trickling sound. And then time too had faded. The pick's wooden handle had been caught by the edge of the stone and he could not budge it in the narrow space. He had gnawed it through with his teeth, but how long this had taken he did not knew, for he had slept, waking again and again to resume the gnawing. He swallowed the chewed-off wood. On the floor was a puddle of gritty water which he managed to scoop up with his hand. At last he could wrench away a stump of the handle. He had thumped with it against the stone for hours, for days, waking from sleep. The miracle had happened at last: they heard the ghostly tapping. By the time they reached him he was unconscious. But after attention he came to with a grunt. Sam Two Fingers was tough as a mule.

She did not ask for the history of his return. She only whimpered from the sofa. "I want to go to bed."

"Aye," he said briefly, "go on."

She rose, swayed, but huddled herself to the door. He stood, looking taller in his leanness, and watched her from those resurrected eyes.

"A red dress!" was all he said. "No mourning for me!"

He lay at her side in bed like a stranger, not moving. Even his breathing was different; soft it was, as a cat breathes. If only he would touch her she thought her fear would break; once more he would be an alive man. Yet she dreaded that he would touch her with that two-fingered hand. She forced her tongue to say: "You are sleeping?" He did not answer but she knew he was awake. That night she went down to the last depths of the world. She slept at last and woke to find him gone from her side. And the house felt empty, as a house from which a dead person has been removed.

Yet he was downstairs and she smelt something burning. She went down in her nightgown. He had kindled the kitchen fire and was burning her red dress. Under his arm was the handbag. She whispered: "There's three pound notes in that bag."

"Not now," he said. "Three pounds towards the fifty you got to save." And he thrust the bag into the fire's core.

Her new suitcase would come up with the station lorry that

morning. She went pale. Thought of the suitcase brought that Birmingham man back to her mind. What was his name? . . . Had that holiday been? She ran upstairs and threw herself on the bed in fright. She did not know his address. But perhaps he would not come, perhaps he had only been playing with her, like they did on holiday. Very likely he was married.

She crept about the house, mechanical at tasks. Sam took very little notice of her, calm in his new power. His only move from the house was to the back lane, where he gossiped with such night-shift men as were hanging about. She had to go to the shops. Women looked at her curiously but no one spoke to her; she kept her eyes down. When she arrived back he was smashing up her suitcase, a look of calm but terrible deliberation in his face.

"Well," she panted, "there's foolish!"

"You shut up," he said. He glanced at her shopping basket. "You better start saving. Fifty quid you owe your uncle."

Three days passed just the same, Sam silent but watching her like a cat that seems not to be watching. He never touched her, day or night. Was it that, though physically he was not harmed by his entombment, the shock had unhinged his mind? From him came that new shut-in strength. He had always been bossy and a talkative strutter, but now a deeper and more tenacious power surrounded him so that she felt he was following her even when she went out alone. She wanted to run away, to plead for sanctuary at her Uncle Dai's, screaming that Sam was contemplating some awful punishment, perhaps murder. He showed no signs of returning to work and sat reading a newspaper or book for hours. If only he went to a dog race!

Several times she walked as far as the tram-car stop but always turned back. And there he was still, grey by the fireside, his thick neck bent over a newspaper. If she said something he told her to shut up. But once again he warned her to start saving; he wasn't going to have her beholden to her tyke of an uncle.

"How can I save all that?" she whimpered, but a bit rebellious too.

"Starve yourself," he barked. "And if you buy any clothes I'll knock you into the middle of next week."

Bad luck follows the damned. Sam it was who, when she was out, took in the telegram and opened it. She found the slip of

paper on the kitchen table—"Arriving tomorrow afternoon. Ted." Sam sat laboriously reading the book of Dickens lent him by a neighbour. He said nothing and she knew by his shoulders that no word could be dragged out of him. She went upstairs and lay on the bed; her stomach was plunging. But presently a new thought came to her and she sat up with a vindictive expression. Now was her chance!

Next day she dressed herself carefully, made up her face, and took several aspirins. She told Sam: "I've got a visitor coming to tea."

"Aye," he said, "I'll be here." And turned a page of that maddening book.

"When are you going back to work?" she forced herself to ask.

"You'll know when. . . . But I'm not working for you to bloody well pay your uncle fifty quid, see! You got to pay him off your own belly and back, if it takes you ten years."

"You . . . you devil!" she breathed. But her inside was plunging again. He read on calmly.

There was only one train in the afternoon. She could have met it. But, her face set, she stayed in the house. She did not want Ted to turn back at the station. The kettle was beginning to boil on the fire when the knocker went. Sam still read, sitting in old trousers and shirt-sleeves rolled up; with him a book had to be finished once begun. Her neck throbbing, she closed the kitchen door behind her. Ted stood on the front step with an attaché-case, a new soft hat, and a raincoat neatly folded over his arm. Quite smartly dressed he was, and a man who would make such a long journey to see a holiday pick-up is clearly much attracted. Her confidence grew. "Hello, Megan," he said with a kind of nervous jauntiness. "You never thought I'd come, I bet?"

She smiled gently and quiveringly, the whole appeal of an ill-used woman in it. Her eyes had both hurt and begging. And in the passage she clutched his arm, whimpered a little against his shoulder and let him smell her hair, shampooed that morning. He said, unsteadily: "Why, what's the matter? . . . There, there now. Have you missed me?"

"Something has happened," she whispered. "My husband is here."

He stiffened. "But you told me he was dead."

"It was a mistake. He was rescued after being buried a whole week in the pit. . . . Oh, Ted, so cruel he's been to me. I've been going mad. I can't stand it any longer, no indeed I can't." She clung to his arm.

A call made to a man's gallantry—unless he is of exceptional quality—is rarely left unanswered. Though still bewildered, Ted's face became stern. Having travelled to India he looked upon himself as a man of the world. This dour, ugly coal-mining valley with its harsh look and frowning mountains had depressed him as he walked up from the station. And here was a dainty, tragical little woman chained in it by some ruffian of a husband who was ill-treating her.

All the same, he mumbled cautiously enough: "Well, do you want me to see him?"

"Yes," she whispered, in a weak little voice.

"And you want to come away with me?" he asked, a trifle uneasily.

Again she laid her head in trust on his shoulder and breathed: "Yes."

Sam looked up from his book when they walked in. The table was laid for tea, very bright and clean, though there was not much food. Sam looked thick, squat and working-man beside Ted's slim but half-wavering height. Megan, standing with her eyes suddenly flashing, said to her husband, who had nodded briefly to the stranger: "A friend that I met in Weston-super-Mare."

"Your fancy man, you mean," Sam grunted, and gave Ted another hard but not dangerous look.

"Will you sit down, Ted?" she asked in an ignoring way, and went to pour water into the teapot.

"You stop that!" barked Sam to her. "There's no fancy man of my wife going to drink tea in my house."

"Don't be so silly," she said unsteadily, and went on pouring water.

He lifted his foot and neatly kicked the pot out of her hand. It smashed on the hearth. Ted involuntarily jumped up, his hat falling from his knee. Megan began whimpering; perhaps her hand was scalded. "Here!" exclaimed Ted in a peculiar way. Sam sat back in his chair and looked at him squarely. "What you going to do about it?" he asked, but quite polite.

"He's taking me away!" shouted Megan, enraged. Her face had become twisted and mottled, lips thin as a viper's, eyes hard and menacing. But only for a moment—for she had caught Ted's glance at her. She threw herself whimpering into the sofa, her head lolling woebegone.

Sam, quite calm, told Ted to sit down again. He then addressed the visitor exclusively and with concentration, paying no attention to Megan's sobs: "Look here now, Mr. What's-your-name, you listen to me. . . . You're welcome to her, if you like. She's a bitch but got good points and only wants training—ever had anything to do with greyhounds?" Ted, pale at the gills, shook his head. "Well," Sam resumed, "you don't know how they got to be trained, then, and what I'm meaning is that everybody's got to be trained in the same way. Everybody's got to knuckle under some way or another. I got to knuckle under to a lot of sods in the pits, and as I see it a woman's got to knuckle under to a boss of a husband. . . . She," he jerked a thumb towards Megan, "don't want to and thinks she can break this bloody world's rules and go kicking around with no respect for anything. . . . Know what she did soon as she thought I wasn't coming out of that pit alive? Raised fifty quid on my insurance and ran off to Weston-super-Mare without as much as buying a black blouse in mourning of me! That's the sort of woman she is. The old blooming place is talking about it. Why did she do it? All because I go off to the dogs when I've had a day's bellyful of the pits and don't hang around her neck of evenings like a suckling pig." His eyes seemed to shoot together in a righteous ferocity. "She's one of those women that want to make a chap go wobbly at the knees before her, see? Or treat him like a concertina ready for her to play a tune on when she feels like it. She's got to be cured of it, and that's my warning to you." He slewed a cunning little eye over the startled visitor. "All the same, she's married to me and I'm not divorcing her, see! But if you want her, there she is and you won't be hearing from me any more."

Ted had listened to this recital with astonishment and perhaps a bit of fear in his narrow, orderly face. He opened his mouth but closed it again. It was the decisive moment. Suddenly Megan jumped wildly off the sofa.

"You're a bully and a brute," she flared at Sam. Her fists

doubled, she heaved towards him. "If I was a man I'd knock you down. I don't care if *he* takes me away or not. I'm going to leave you." Glitteringly she advanced a step further towards him. He looked at her unswervingly but his eyes began to dance. "You've never been anything else but a mean ruffian, and I hate you. I wish you were rotting now in the pit!" Their gaze was entwined like two flames. She screamed: "I'm going, I'm going now."

As if to ward off a blow, he lifted his hand. It was the stumpy two-fingered hand. And she stared at those fingers like someone gone daft. The shadow of a little grin seemed to lurk on his face. But all he said, coolly, was: "Don't forget your Uncle Dai wants fifty quid off you, and if I know the tyke he'll track you down to the end of the earth for fifty bob!"

Shrinking back, she broke into sobbing and fell once more on to the sofa. "Why wasn't you killed, why wasn't you killed!" she wept.

Sam turned to the visitor: "Well, what you going to do? Make up your mind, man. Women don't like mild guts. If you want her, she's there."

Ted shifted his new hat uneasily from one knee to the other. But he mumbled: "It can't be done if you won't divorce her."

"I see you got a respect for the wedding ring," Sam said approvingly. He added largely: "Seeing that you thought I was dead I'm not blaming you for chasing a skirt to where you got no business. . . . Well," he raised his voice to the still sobbing Megan, "seems that your fancy bloke don't want you. Perhaps he thinks you'd do him in for the sake of insurance on him. So you're left on the seashore properly, eh?"

Megan wept: "I won't be bandied about. Devils of men. I'll kill myself——" She jumped up again.

"You've brought it on your own head," Sam barked, very severe. "What about me, coming back after seven days in my grave and finding my wife gallivanting to the seaside on the insurance money? Expect me to sit down and eat a pork pie as if nothing had happened? By Christ, what about me! I been dead and come alive again and I find the world gone rotten because a woman haven't got even the bit of decency to pull down the blinds and sit wearing a bit of black for me."

She gazed at him in fear. But for the first time since her return

he looked more the old Sam, more alive, as if he was smashing his way through from wherever he had been, that place of stern and ghostly silence. Yet there was something new in him too, something less cocky and more mature. She shrank back from him, and at the same time her body slackened. Her face looked dwindled and older. She leaned against the dresser, hanging her head.

The visitor rose awkwardly. The room had suddenly filled with a new private tension in which he was cancelled out. He did not know what to say. Sam helped him. "They'll give you a meal in the Tuberville Arms. Beer there is all right. So long." Ted went out with a quick sidling movement; even his slim hips, going round the door, looked relieved.

"Done for proper, aren't you!" Sam remarked. "Fancy man gone, fifty quid in debt, and a cruel husband back from the grave. Well, there's the door. It's a free country."

"He wasn't ever my fancy man," she burst out. "Everything was respectful. We were only interested in each other. . . . How was I to know they'd rescue you," she wailed, "after Mr. Rowlands told me there wasn't any hope!"

"You should have stayed here and gone into mourning properly," he insisted, severe as a chapel minister. "Coming back here dressed up in red like a Christmas doll. . . ." His voice began to boil again.

She leaned her head on the dresser shelf and wept again. Hearing him approach she lifted her head and cried out in hysteria, a long irritating howl. It was her last struggle. He gave her a crack on the jaw, not heavy but sufficient to send her against the wall, where she slumped down more in submission than because of the blow. She stopped howling. She saw him not as Sam but as some huge force not to be escaped. He picked her up. His two fingers dug into her back. His mouth caught hers like flame obliterating a piece of paper. She writhed and twisted for a few moments. But she went under, and came to life again.

Blodwen

"PUGH JIBBONS IS AT THE BACK DOOR," cried Blodwen's mother from upstairs. "Go and get four pounds of peas."

A sulky look came to Blodwen's face for a moment. She hated going out to Pugh Jibbons to buy vegetables, she couldn't bear his insolent looks. Nevertheless, after glancing in the kitchen mirror, she walked down the little back garden and opened the door that led into the waste land behind the row of houses.

A small cart, with a donkey in the shafts, stood there piled high with vegetables. Pugh Jibbons—the son of old Pugh Jibbons, so called because he always declared that jibbons (that being the local name for spring onions) cured every common ailment in man—leaned against the cart waiting for her. This was almost a daily occurrence.

He did not greet her. He looked at her steadily, as she stood under the lintel of the door, a slight flush in her cheeks, and ordered, in a harsh voice of contempt:

"Four pounds of peas!"

Pugh Jibbons grinned. He was a funny-looking fellow. A funny fellow. Perhaps there was a gipsy strain in him. He was of the Welsh who have not submitted to industrialism, Nonconformity or imitation of the English. He looked as though he had issued from a cave in the mountains. He was swarthy and thick-set, with rounded, powerful limbs and strong dark tufts of hair everywhere. Winter and summer he bathed in the river and lived in a tiny house away up on the mountain-side, near to the lower slope where his allotment of vegetables was. His father, with whom he lived, was now old and vague and useless; the jibbons had not kept him his senses; and his mother was dead. They had always lived a semi-wild life on the mountain-side, earning a bit of money selling their vegetables, which were good and healthy, in the Valley below.

"Fourpence a pound they are today," he informed Blodwen. And all his browny-red face went on grinning. He looked right down into her eyes. His were dark and clear and mocking, hers were dark blue and inflamed with anger.

She shrugged her shoulders, though she was indignant at the doubling of the price since yesterday.

"Coming to an end they are now," he said, weighing the peas, but keeping his eye on her, which he winked whenever her disdainful glance came round to him. But she would look into the distance beyond him.

There was usually a box of flowers on the cart. Today there were bunches of pinks in it. He took one out. She held out her apron for the peas and he shovelled them into it, placing the bunch of pinks on the top.

"But I'll chuck those in for the price," he said.

Though nearly always he would thrust a bunch of flowers on her. Usually she took them. But today she didn't want to. She wanted to tell him something. She said:

"Take those flowers back." Her colour came up, she arched her beautiful thick neck, her eyes blazed out on him. "And if you keep on following me about the streets at night I'll set the police on you, I warn you. Where's your decency, man?" And then she wanted to slam the door in his face and hurry away. But she waited, looking at him menacingly.

His mouth remained open for a moment or two after her outburst, comically, his eyes looking at her with startled examination. Then he pushed his cap to the back of his head, thrust out his head aggressively, and demanded:

"Is that bloke that goes about with you your fellow, then?"

Her disdainful face lifted, she rapped out, "Something unpleasant to say to you that fellow will have if you don't watch out, you rude lout."

Then he became mocking and teasing again, his eyes sharp with wickedness. "He's not a bloke for you, well you know that," he said daringly. "Toff as he is and tall and elegant, he's not a bloke for you. I know him and I know the family out of what he comes. There's no guts to any of his lot. Haw-haw and behave politely and freeze yourself all up. There's no juice and no seed and no marrow and no bones to him. Oswald Vaughan! Haw-haw." And screwing up his face to a caricature of a toff's expression, he stood before her undismayed and mocking, his short thick legs apart and almost bandy.

"You . . ." she muttered, raging, ". . . You wait. You'll be sorry for this." She slammed the door and hurried to the kitchen.

The unspeakable ruffian! What right had he to talk of Oswald like that. And "He's not a bloke for you, well you know that!" Impudence. Pugh Jibbons, someone they bought vegetables from! Why, however had it happened? To have a ruffian of a stranger talk of her affairs like that.

She threw the peas out of her apron on to the table. The bunch of pinks was among them. She trembled with anger. She had intended throwing them back at him. She ought never to have accepted flowers from him before. He was always shoving a bunch of flowers in her hands or sticking them among the vegetables. Never again. She'd throw his flowers back at him. These pinks she had a good mind to put in the fire.

But they smelled so sweet and they were so delicate, she couldn't throw them away. She lifted her arm for a vase. Her shape was splendid. She was a fine, handsome young woman of twenty-five, all her body graceful and well-jointed, with fine movements, unconsciously proud and vehement. Her face, when she was silent and alone, was often sullen. But always it had a glow. She was a virgin. Her sister was married, her father was checkweight man in the colliery, her mother was always urging her to wed.

Oswald Vaughan, the son of the local solicitor, had been courting her for some months now. He was in his father's office. His family was one of the most respected in the place, big chapel people. Mrs. Vaughan had been put away in an asylum at one time. Even now there was a strange dead look about her. But Oswald was quite normal, he was all right and all there. He was the smartest man in the Valley, with his London clothes and little knick-knacks. Both father and son read big books, and indeed they were very clever, in their minds. Very brainy.

Oswald courted Blodwen with great devotion. He came to her as though to a meal. He himself said he was hungry for women. He would sit with her in the parlour of her home and hold her hands tightly or hug her shoulders with a lingering pressure. He respected her and, believing her to be intelligent, he brought books on verse and read her Wordsworth and Tennyson, especially the latter's *In Memoriam*, of which he had a profound admiration. When he left her he was refreshed and walked home in an ecstasy. Blodwen would go to the kitchen for supper and, oddly enough, something would be sure to irritate her, always,

either something wrong with the food or she took offence at some observation of her mother or father. She was a difficult girl, really.

Her anger against Pugh Jibbons persisted as she went about the duties of the day, fuming continually not only in her mind but in her blood. If there had been a stick near as he had mocked at her that morning she would have laid it about him. It was the only way to treat a man of his kind. She was quite capable of giving him a good sound beating with a strong stick. The low-down ruffian. And her anger had not abated even by the time Oswald called that evening. She went into the parlour, her eyes glittering with bad temper.

Oswald sat opposite her and laid his clean yellow gloves on his knee. His face was pale and narrow, with a frugal nose and pale, steady eyes. Dull his face was, Blodwen suddenly decided, looking at him with a new gaze, dull and unredeemed by any exceptional expression. And what he said, as he neatly pulled up his fine creased trousers at the knees and then sat back with his hands clasped in an attitude of prayer, made her want to slap him.

"You're looking very wicked and naughty this evening, my dear. That's no way to receive your young man."

Her face became inscrutable: she stared through the window. He went on:

"You know, I always think a woman should never be anything but bright and happy when her men-folk are about. That's her duty in life." He leant towards her and took her hand. "When you're my wife, my dear——"

"Let's go out," Blodwen suddenly interjected. "I feel I must have some fresh air this evening. I've been in all day." Her voice had become even and calm.

He drew back, a bit stiffly. He sighed. But he was submissive, much as he wanted to stay in the parlour and caress her. He began to draw on his gloves.

"We'll go to the pictures if you like," he said. He was very fond of going to the cinema with her. Nothing he liked better than sitting in the warm, florid atmosphere of the cinema, pressing Blodwen's hand and watching a love film.

"I'd rather go for a walk," she answered, turning her sparkling eyes on him fully.

"There's so few walks about here," he sighed.

"There's the mountains," she said.

She liked going up the mountains. He didn't. Not many people climbed the mountains: they had been there all their lives and seemed not of much account, and dull to walk on. Great bare flanks of hills.

"All right," he said, getting up and looking in the mirror over the mantel to put his tie straight. Blodwen went out to put on her hat.

As they went down the street the neighbours looked at them appraisingly. Everybody said what a picture they looked, the picture of a happy couple. He with his tall, slim elegance and she with her healthy, wholesome-looking body, her well-coloured face, they seemed so suitably matched to wed. His fine superiority and breeding wed to her wild fecund strength. They looked such a picture walking down the street, it did the heart good to see it.

They crossed the brook that ran, black with coal-dust, beneath some grubby unkempt alders, and climbed a straggling path at the rocky base of the hills. Presently Oswald remarked:

"You're very quiet this evening."

Then there came to her eyes a little malicious gleam. He had taken her arm and was gazing down at her fondly—even though, as the path became steeper, he began to breathe heavily, almost in a snort. She said:

"I've been upset today."

"Oh! What was it?"

"You know that man called Pugh Jibbons, the son of old Jibbons, who sells vegetables in a donkey-cart?"

"Yes, of course. Everybody knows him. They're a fine rough lot, that family. Half-wild."

"Well, he molests me."

"Molests you!" Oswald exclaimed. "He has attacked you, you mean?" His mouth remained open in astonishment and horror.

"Oh no. Not attacked me. But he bothers me and follows me about. And this morning I was buying vegetables from him at our back door and he said—oh, he said some rude things."

"Does he follow you about in the streets, make himself a nuisance to you?" Oswald demanded alertly, the young solicitor.

"Yes, he does," she said angrily.

"Then," said Oswald, "we'll send him a warning letter. I can't have you being bothered like this. The rapscallion. I'll put a stop to him. I'll have a letter sent him tomorrow."

"Will you?" she said mechanically, looking up to the hills.

"Of course. That's where I come in useful for you. A solicitor's letter will frighten him, you'll see."

"Perhaps," she said after a moment or two, "you'd better leave it for a time. Nothing serious is there to complain of. And I told him myself this morning, I warned him. So we'll wait perhaps."

She persuaded him, after some debate, that it would be better to postpone the sending of the letter: but as he argued she became angrier and nearly lost her temper. Then he became very gentle with her, endeavouring to soothe her, realising she had had a trying day. But her eyes remained hard.

Not until they got to the mountain-top did she seem to regain her good spirits. She loved the swift open spaces of the mountain-tops. They sat beneath a huge grey stone that crouched like an elephant in a dip of the uplands, which billowed out beneath them in long, lithe declivities. They could see all the far-flung valley between the massive different hills. Some of those hills were tall and suave and immaculate, having escaped the desecration of the coal-mines, others were rounded and squat like the wind-blown skirt of a gigantic woman, some were shapeless with great excrescences of the mines, heaps of waste matter piled up black and forbidding, others were small and young and helpless, crouching between their bulked brothers. Blodwen felt eased, gazing at the massed hills stretched along the fourteen miles of the Valley. She felt eased and almost at peace again. Oswald glanced at her and saw she wanted to be quiet, though the storm had left her brow. He sat back against the rock and musingly fingered his heavy gold ring. He did not care for the mountain-tops himself. It was dull up there: and he seemed to be lost in the ample space.

He couldn't bear the silence for very long. He had to say something. He couldn't bear her looking away so entranced in some world of her own.

"A penny for them," he said, touching her shoulder lightly.

She gave a sudden start and turned wondering eyes to him. And her eyes were strange to him, as though she did not know him. They were blue and deep as the sea, and old and heavy, as though with the memory of lost countries. She did not speak, only looked at him in startled wonder. One would have thought a stranger had touched her and spoken.

"Why d'you look at me like that?" he said at last, uneasy and hating her staring.

Her expression changed. She almost became his familiar Blodwen again. She smiled a little.

"You're a funny little woman," he said, sliding his arm round her waist.

"It's fine up here," she said.

But still she was different and not the human Blodwen that he knew in the parlour or the cinema. He couldn't warm himself with her at all. Her body seemed rigid and unyielding in his caress. She was hard and profitless as these mountain-tops. Almost he began to dislike her, and something inside him stirred in dark anger against her. But all the time his manner and tactics became gentler and more coaxing and more submissive to her whim. His face was appealing and submissive. But she persisted in her odd aloof withdrawal, and at last he decided she couldn't be well, that she was suffering from some esoteric feminine complaint that he must not intrude upon. So he abandoned his love-making and sat back against the rock and became deliberately meditative himself. He did not see the shade of impatience that crossed her face.

He considered the evening wasted and a failure as they descended the mountain in the grey-blue light. And something had happened to Blodwen, something curious and beyond his understanding. Yet for all his secret dissatisfaction he became more anxious in his behaviour towards her, more gentle and tremulous in his approaches. But she spoke to him and treated him as though she were another man: they might have been men together instead of lovers. He was hungry to hold her, to feel the strong living substance of her body. But somehow he could not penetrate the subtle atmosphere of aloofness that she wrapped herself in. He kept on sighing, in the hope that she would notice it. Women were very funny.

She did not ask him into the house, but lifted her lips to him, her eyes shut, inside the gateway of the garden. In a sudden spurt of anger he pecked quickly at her mouth and withdrew. She opened her eyes and they seemed unfathomable as the night sky. They both waited in silence for a few moments and then, lowering her head, she said calmly:

"Good night, Oswald."

"Good night, Blodwen."

He lifted his bowler hat and turned resolutely away.

She went in, slowly and meditatively. Her face was calm and thoughtful now. But she was aware of Oswald and his dissatisfaction. She couldn't help it. There were times now and again when his limp and clumsy love-making affronted her, as there were times when it amused her and when it roused her to gentle tenderness. After all, he was young: only twenty-five. Married, she would soon change him and mould him, surely she would? She wondered. Married, things would be different. She'd have to settle down. Surely Oswald was the ideal husband to settle down with. She would have a well-ordered life with no worries of money or work. Oswald would have his father's practice and become a moderately wealthy man: and his family had position. Had always been of the best class in the place. Different from her family, for her grandfather had been an ordinary collier and even now they were neither working- nor upper-class. Her mother was so proud of the step-up marriage to Oswald would mean: she had already bought several things on the strength of it—a new parlour set of furniture, a fur coat and odd things like a coffee-set and silver napkin-rings and encyclopædias and leather books of poetry. It would be a lovely showy wedding too.

But she wished she didn't have that curious empty feeling in her when she thought of it all, sometimes. Not always. Sometimes she realised Oswald's virtues and deeply respected him for them: good manners, breeding, smartness, a knowledge of international affairs and languages, a liking for verse. Yet she knew and feared that void of emptiness in her when she thought of all that marriage with him implied.

When she went to bed a little perplexed frown had gathered on her brow. She rose early in the morning feeling very discontented and melancholy. She had a cold bath. In a kind of anguish of bliss she shuddered in the water, sluicing it between her pink-white breasts so that it rippled down her fine length like a quick, cool hand. Her wild fair hair glistening as though with dew, her limbs tautened by the cold bath, she strode downstairs and ate a good breakfast of bacon and eggs, stewed apples, toast and tea. Then she felt somewhat better, though she was far from being content.

She remembered Pugh Jibbons and how angry she had been with

him yesterday. What he wanted now was a good rude snub and she'd give it him that morning. And thinking of him, her blood began to run faster again. She'd never heard of such impudence. Anybody would think she had encouraged him at some time or other. That riff-raff!

When she heard his shout in the back lane she asked her mother what vegetables they wanted and sauntered up the garden to the door.

"Morning," said Pugh, looking at her with just a suspicion of mockery in his face. "And how's the world using you today, then?"

Statuesque, with that insulting ignoring of a person that a woman can assume, she did not hear his greeting and ordered peremptorily:

"Three pounds of beans and six of potatoes."

"Proud we are this morning," he observed.

He stood before her and looked at her directly, unmoving. She began to flush and arch her neck; she looked beyond him, to the right, to the left, and then her glance came back to him. His smile was subtle and profound, the light in his gleaming dark eyes was shrewd. She wanted to turn and hurry away, slam the door on him. But she didn't. His swarthy face, with its dark gipsy strain, was full of a knowledge that she sensed rather than saw. His head rested deliberately and aggressively on his powerful neck.

Suddenly she ejaculated furiously:

"Don't stare at me like that! D'you hear! Where's your manners? What right have you to stand there staring at me!"

"You know what right I have," he answered slowly. And the smile had left his face and given way completely to the hard determination of desire.

She hadn't expected all this, she had meant to coldly snub him and depart. And how strange she had gone, how still and waiting her body, as though absorbed in expectant fear for what would happen next. And she was amazed, when she answered, unable to bear the silence, that her voice faltered in her beating throat:

"I know, do I? I warn you, Pugh Jibbons, not to molest me."

"Suppose," he answered, a thin, wiry grin coming to his face, "that Oswald Vaughan would have something to say and do about it?"

Her anger flowed up again. "What right have you," she

demanded again, "to interfere with me? Never have I encouraged you. Haven't you any decency, man? You're nothing to me." And then she was angry with herself for submitting to his advances to the point of discussion, instead of maintaining a haughty aloofness. She couldn't understand why she had given way to him so easily.

He looked at her. All his body and face seemed tense, gathered up to impose themselves on her.

"I figure it out," he said, "that I've got a right to *try* and have you. Because I want you. You're a woman for me. And I think I'm a man for you. That's what I think. I could do for you what you want and I want. That's what I feel."

She stared at him. She had got control of herself. But she couldn't snub him in the harsh final way she had intended. She said haughtily:

"I don't want to hear any more about this. Give me the beans and potatoes, please."

Pugh Jibbons came a step nearer to her, and she became acutely conscious of his body and face.

"You come to me one evening," he said. "You come to me one evening and a talk we'll have over this. I promise to respect you. I've got more to tell you about yourself than you think."

She drew back. "Ha," she exclaimed with fine derision, "what a hope you've got! Are you going to give me the beans and potatoes or not?"

He looked her over and then immediately became the vegetable man. He weighed out the beans and potatoes. Aloofly she watched him, her face stern. Today there were bunches of wide flat marguerites in the flower-box at the front of the cart. He took out a bunch.

"I don't want the flowers, thank you," she said coldly.

"Nay," he said, "you must take them. You're one of my best regular customers."

"I don't want the flowers," she repeated, looking at him stonily.

He tossed the bunch back into the box.

"Silly wench," he said.

"Don't you call me names!" she turtled up again.

"You deserve them," he said. Then he looked her over with desiring appreciation. "But a handsome beauty you are, by God,

a handsome beauty. Different from the chits of today. Pah, but your mind is stupid, because you won't be what you want to be."

She quivered: and her anger had become strange in her blood, rather like fear. She could find nothing to say to him; she turned, slammed the door and hurried with the vegetables to the kitchen. All her blood seemed to run cold, fear seemed to sink down in her body, and suddenly she felt desperately anxious. Desperately because something was withering within her being, some living thing she should have cherished. Beyond the anger and irritation of her mind she knew a fear and anxiety like a touch of icy death in her being.

The day became cold and drab to her. She went about the house shut in a sullen resentful silence. Her mother looked at her with ill-temper. The mother was a tall, vigorous woman. But her face had gone tart and charmless with the disillusion frequent in working women whose lives have been nothing but a process of mechanical toil and efforts to go one better than their neighbours. She, too, in her day had had her violences. But her strength had gone to sinew and hard muscle. Even now she cracked brazil nuts with her teeth, heaved a hundredweight of coal from cellar to kitchen and could tramp twenty miles over the hills on bank-holidays. And now she distrusted the world and wanted security for herself and her daughters.

"What's the matter with you, girl?" she demanded irritably, as Blodwen sat silent over the midday meal. "Shift that sulky look off your face."

Blodwen did not answer. But her mouth sneered unpleasantly.

"You look at me like that, you shifty slut," the mother exclaimed angrily, "you'll leave this table."

The daughter got up and swept out of the room. Her head was turtled up fearless as an enraged turkey.

"Ha," shouted the mother after her, "don't you dare show that ugly face to me again, or, grown-up or not, you'll feel the weight of my hand. Out with you."

But Blodwen had dignity, sweeping out of the room, and her silence was powerful with contempt.

"Bringing a girl up," muttered the mother to herself, "to snarl and insult one, as though she's what-not or the Queen of England. Ach, that she was ten years younger. I'd give her what for on that b.t.m. of hers. The stuck-up insulting girl that she is."

Blodwen stayed in her bedroom for the rest of the day, knitting. At six-thirty Oswald called. She came down to the parlour, still a little sulky. There was anxiety on Oswald's face as he greeted her. She had frightened him last night. And now he couldn't live without her: she was the sole reality in his life.

"My dear," he murmured, pressing her hand, "my own dear."

She actually smiled up at him.

"Are you better?" he asked gently.

"I haven't been ill," she said.

"Nothing physical, perhaps," he said, primly, "but out-of-sorts mentally, I should think."

She sat beside him on the sofa.

"Oswald," she said, "when shall we get married?"

He started excitedly. Before, he had never been able to make her decide anything definite about their marriage. She had always dismissed the subject, declaring there was plenty of time yet. He wanted to get married quickly, so that he could proceed to entire happiness with this fine woman: he wanted it quickly.

"My darling," he cried gratefully, "my sweet, as soon as you like. I could be ready in a month. There's a house going on Salem Hill and I've got the money for furniture. We could begin buying at once. I saw a lovely walnut bedroom suite in a shop in Cardiff last week; I wanted to reserve it there and then. I'll phone for it tomorrow. And all the other things we could choose together. We'll go down to Cardiff tomorrow. I'll get the day off." His face began to shine excitedly.

She looked at him.

"Not a month though," she said slowly; "perhaps we want more than a month to prepare."

"Six weeks, then," he said.

"Soon," she said, in a curious kind of surging voice, "soon. Let it be soon. Six weeks, then. That will be soon enough." Her hand crept up his arm. "That will give us time to prepare and not too much time to change our minds. Six weeks. Oh, you do want to marry, don't you, Oswald?"

"My dear," he cried in pain. "How strange you are!"

But she put her face to his to be kissed. Their mouths met. She clung to him desperately.

She would not go out to buy vegetables off Pugh Jibbons again.

She told her mother how he molested her. The mother went to the back door and roundly denounced the young hawker. Pugh had laughed at her. And Oswald again offered to have a letter sent him.

The weeks went by: autumn came on. There were endless preparations for the wedding. Blodwen, it was true, took little interest in them. She allowed Oswald to arrange and buy everything. She was very calm; and her manner and behaviour changed. She lost her high-flown demeanour, she never lost her temper, and her face went a little wan. Now her dark blue eyes seemed deeper and more remote beneath her long brows, and her mouth was flower-soft, red as geranium, but drooped.

The week before the wedding there was a touch of winter in the air. Blodwen liked the winter. She was as strong as a bear amid the harsh winds and the wild snow and the whips of rain that winter brings to the vales of the hills. She took on added strength in the winter, like a bear.

One early evening as the wind lashed down through the serried rows of houses huddled in the vale she stood looking out at the hills from an upstairs window of her home. The grey sky was moving and violent over the brown mountains, and the light of evening was flung out. Her face was lifted like an eager white bird to the hills. She would have to go, she could not stay in the house any longer. She entirely forgot that Oswald was due in a few minutes.

She wound a heavy woollen scarf round her neck and, unknown to her mother and father, who were in the kitchen, she let herself out. And blindly, seeing no one and nothing in the streets, she went on towards the base of the lonely mountains. Slowly the light died into the early wintry evening, the heavens were misted and darkened, moved slower, though in the west a dim exultance of coppery light still loitered.

Her nostrils dilated in the sharp air, but her limbs thrilled with warmth. Her feet sank in the withering mignonette-coloured grass of the lower slopes, and she climbed lithely and easily the steep pathless little first hill. She was conscious of Pugh Jibbons' allotments surrounding his ramshackle stone house to the left, but she did not look at them. He, however, saw her, rising from his hoeing of potatoes.

The night would soon come. She cared nothing. She wanted

to be on the dominant mountain tops, she wanted to see the distant hills ride like great horses through the darkening misty air. She quickened her steps and her breasts began to heave with the exertion. She had crossed the smaller first hill and was ascending the mountain behind it. She was quite alone on the hills.

The black jagged rocks jutting out on the brow of the mountains were like a menace. She began to laugh, shaking out her wild hair; she unwound her scarf and bared her throat to the sharp slap of the wind. She would like to dance on the mountain-top, she would like to shake her limbs and breasts until they were hard and lusty as the wintry earth. She forgot her destination in the world below.

She had reached the top. Night was not yet; and out of the grey seas of mist the distant hills rode like horses. She saw thick, massive limbs, gigantic flanks and long ribbed sides of hills. She saw plunging heads with foam at their mouths. She saw the great bodies of the hills, and in her own body she knew them.

Oswald sat in the parlour with Blodwen's mother. The gas had been lit and a tiny fire burned in the paltry grate. Oswald looked distracted. He had been waiting for over an hour already. It was most strange. It had been a definite arrangement for him to see Blodwen that evening. There were important things to discuss for the wedding on Saturday. Her mother could offer no explanation but kept on repeating angrily:

"Why didn't she say she was going out! The provoking girl."

"Can't you think where she has gone to?" Oswald asked more than once.

"No. Most secretive she's been lately. Secretive and funny. I've put it down to the fuss of preparing. A serious job it is for a girl to prepare for marriage. Some it makes hysterical, some silly and others secretive and funny, like Blodwen." She tried her best to keep the conversation going with the distracted young man. Inside, she was fuming. She suspected that Blodwen had gone out with the deliberate intention of escaping Oswald. What madness! She'd give the girl a good talking-to when she returned.

"Have you noticed it too?" exclaimed Oswald. "I've wondered what's the matter with her. But, as you say, it's such a big change

for a girl to get married, she must lose her balance now and again."

"Especially a highly strung girl like Blodwen," said the mother. "For highly strung she is, though in health as strong as a horse. No trouble of ailments have I had with her. From a baby she has trotted about frisky as can be." And to try and soothe him she added gravely, "Do you well she will, Oswald, a big satisfaction you'll have out of her. And in house matters she can work like a black and cook like a Frenchie, she can make quilts and eider-downs and wine, and she can cure boils and gripe and other things by herbs as I have cured them in my own husband. Taught her all my knowledge I have. A girl she is such as you don't see often nowadays. Highly strung she might be, but, handled properly, docile enough she'll be."

"I think we'll get on all right," said Oswald nervously, "though no doubt we'll have our ups and downs."

"Aye," said the mother.

The clock ticked away. Oswald kept on glancing at it mournfully, then at his watch, to make sure that *was* the time. The mother looked at him with a sort of admiring bliss in her eyes. He was such a toff and belonged to such a family. Fancy her Blodwen marrying into the Vaughan family! No wonder she was an envied mother and people were deferential to her now. She had been a cook at one time.

"Wherever can she be?" he repeated, sighing.

"I can't think at all," said Blodwen's mother, sharpening her voice to sympathise with his agitation. "But I'll tell her of this tonight, I'll tell her, never fear."

"Oh, don't, please," he begged. "We must be gentle with her the next few days, we must put up with her whims." He looked at her appealingly and added, "No doubt she'll have a reasonable explanation when she arrives back."

But Pugh Jibbons, in his old stony house on the hillside, was laying a flower on the white hillock of her belly, with tender exquisite touch a wide, flat, white marguerite flower, its stalk bitten off, his mouth pressing it into her rose-white belly, laughing.

The Public-House

Opposite his home was the great public-house, a stone building edged with bright yellow bricks. The boy liked the public-house. It was clamorous with life, its interior brilliant with coloured bottles and vivid with a harsh smell; the movement of humanity in it interested him. After the staid cleanliness of his home it was satisfying to be allowed entrance, particularly in the early winter evenings, when the pink-speckled gas-lamps were lit and the floor was golden with fresh sawdust and crisp fires burned in the big grates.

He had right of entrance through friendship with the publican's sister, a gaunt spinster of forty who wore much coarse lace about her bodice, a black velvet band firmly binding a high mass of gold hair in which was a strange tint of mildew-green. Generous and lively, she spoke to him in a jokingly rancorous way as if he were grown-up, and gave him pieces of mint-toffee and often a penny. But sometimes she lifted him and stood him on the bar counter, oblivious of the men in the saloon, and, clasping his bare knees with her big moist hands, she would ask him laughingly if he loved her and would he love her always, for ever and for ever. She could make him grin, and because her manner was raucous, he was not offended or humiliated. Yet she made him feel cautious too and he experienced a vague, unformulated feeling when she gripped his knees and, lifting him down from the bar counter, her hands lingered about him. She was a strong woman.

"I don't think the boy ought to get into the habit of going into that public-house," he heard his mother say.

"God bless my soul," replied his father, "he's too young to know even what they're for."

"He'll get so used to a bar——" she went on.

"Well, perhaps he'll go into the business. There's money in pubs, Dorothy. And we'd have brandy and things cost-price, if not for nothing."

An aloof friendship existed between the two families, though the one was chapel-going and the other, being publicans in the

strict Nonconformist place, was cast out in pagan darkness. The ladies gossiped when they met on the pavement and at Christmas exchanged pieces of each other's puddings, one never failing to compliment the other on being more successful than herself. The boy's father, anxious to retain the pub's orders for decoration and painting, sometimes sat on one of its stools and slandered politicians with the publican, a bald widower who looked out on life from the grave of a ruined digestion, eating nothing but frail biscuits and watered-down soups.

"Your boy'll be a preacher," said the publican, surveying the child, who was kneeling behind the bar rearranging some rows of brown bottles.

"He doesn't look a preacher kneeling down among those stouts," chuckled the father. "What makes you think so?"

"His mighty looks at us, as if he's taking us all in and finding us wanting."

Vaguely the boy heard and half understood. He got up from his knees and stared absorbingly at the warm gold of a whisky-bottle. He liked to hold the smooth, cold bottle and shake up the colour. There was the ice-like gin too, and the purple-red of the port, the tawny depths of the sherry; and strange seldom-touched bottles that were startlingly green, white like curdled milk, yellow like buttercups, a red-black like beetroot, and a whitish-gold like sunlight. He stared at them all in turn, lingering for quite two minutes over each. So absorbed was he that he did not see the publican's sister approach and stand, hands on hips, gazing at him as absorbingly.

"Well, my lord, which'll you have?"

He started, pulled from his dream, and saw her large, gaunt nose thrust out to him, the nostrils twitching with amusement. A sudden feeling of recoil gripped him, so that he was hard and unyielding when she swept him up into her arms, exclaiming:

"One day you shall have them all. On your wedding-day. You know what that is? Ah! Your wedding-day!"

The power of her physical warmth and dominant voice encircled him. He wriggled and was subjected. She tickled his ribs and he burst into wild laughter. He slipped to the floor and kicked out his legs. When his father, rapping his empty glass on the bar counter, called out: "Now then, whiskers, time to go home," he jumped up with great alacrity and ran headlong past

the rows of stout and out into the hallway. There he joined his father, who was spitting into an enamelled pan marked *Spit Here*. Hand-in-hand they crossed the road and entered the grey evening silence of home.

He liked the public-house best on Saturday evenings. Then it was bustling and overflowing with people relaxed from the tension of the finished week and determined to enjoy themselves. It reeked of a life that seemed to sprout with raw vigour like some great healthy cabbage. The windows steamed, all the gas-lamps were ablaze, even the big unappetising 'Commercial Room' was filled with a noisy mob of swollen-faced men. He wriggled his way among a forest of thighs, now and again darting right between a pair of men's legs, accompanied perhaps on these occasions by another boy: they played hide-and-seek among the crowded bodies. The publican's sister had no time for him on Saturday evenings. But sometimes she allowed him to climb on to a chair inside the bar and peer over into that narrow dark section of the pub reserved for women. It was shut-away and secretive, that section, and always shadowy, having no lights of its own. These drinking women fascinated him; they appeared only on Saturday nights; they squatted over their glasses of black stout and talked in low, whining voices; they seemed to hide under large dark hats and they wiped their noses on the backs of their hands. There seemed something mournful about them.

Whenever there were apple-fritters Miss Sanders invited him to tea. He ate of them prodigiously, in the sitting-room behind the bar, which, to his great surprise, was like anybody else's sitting-room, containing neither rows of coloured bottles nor sawdust on the floor. Sometimes, after tea, Miss Sanders would play the piano and sing in a deep voice *Oft in the Stilly Night*. She would then turn to him and say in a bantering way that she sounded like a cockerel. Her voice was a hoarse contralto. Once, when it was time for her to go to the bar, she asked him if he would like to screw on her ear-rings for her, but he was so awkward at the job that she did not repeat the invitation. She smelled of violets and the back of her neck was brown as an autumn leaf. But, in spite of the apple-fritters, he preferred being in the public-house proper to sitting there at the back with Miss Sanders.

One afternoon he was playing on the river bank with another boy. They quarrelled, the boy gave him a push and he fell into

the water. His opponent, frightened, ran off. But he had only squelched into some mud, dirtying himself up to his waist. Indignant and alarmed, he gazed in horror at his slimy legs and knickerbockers. How was he to get himself dry and clean before going home! Some particularly unpleasant punishment would be given him if he went home like this. And quickly he thought of his friend Miss Sanders, who never criticised him and would only laugh at his state.

By roundabout back-lane ways, not daring to show himself in the main street, he reached the back of the public-house, scrambled up its wall and dropped into the yard. He crept down some steps and peered into the sitting-room window. Yes, she was on the sofa reading a book. He tapped nervously at the window; in his miserable wet state he dared not go to the door. When Miss Sanders had got him inside, her mouth gaped and she screwed up her eyes with laughter.

"Can you," he stammered, "can you give me a pan for me to wash my knees? And then I'll stand in front of the fire and get dry."

She stood in the middle of the room, her arms lifted, both her hands holding the high tower of her green-gold hair; she was looking at him meditatively now, having stopped laughing. "You come with me," she said at last. And she patted his head, took his hand and drew him upstairs. The swish of her hard shiny skirts was full of determination.

What a big bathroom they had! And it was white and splendid and not like the poked-away corner of the one in his home. Miss Sanders was turning on the taps in the enormous bath; he did not think anything; he gazed inscrutably before him. Briskly, with quick firm gestures, Miss Sanders took hold of him and whipped off his jersey.

He stood very still but once, as if trapped, he gazed round wildly at the door. Miss Sanders's well-known arms, hard and brisk with power, encircled him. They dexterously peeled off his clothes. He was clammy and shivering, and he was overcome with some strange new feeling that presently solidified into a knot of resentment in his mind. Too late! She had got him into the bath.

She rolled up her sleeves and, telling him that presently they would have some nice hot tea and pineapple together, she soaped

him. There was no denying her. Busily, talking all the while with a bright, hard gallop of words, she kneaded and rubbed his flesh. The resentment swelled into anger. At home he washed himself without help now. But he could not bring his tongue to protest. She had the large, high power of the adult, and before this she had always behaved as a friend.

"There now, there now, all white and clean again! My word, look at the water! Eh, your mother would have carried on, I'm glad you came to me first . . . I'll wrap this hot towel round you, and you must wear a little jacket of mine till your clothes are dry. . . ." She had lifted him out and was drying him vigorously, kneeling before him now, her breast oppressively against his face.

He did not enjoy his tea, sitting in the woman's jacket. Something had changed. He kept on gazing straight into the bunch of snapdragons on the table, eating with grave austerity and refusing a second helping of pineapple. He was glad when the publican came into the room. When his clothes were dry, Miss Sanders insisted on dressing him. Once she glanced sharply into his face and said:

"You mustn't be frightened, your mother won't be angry now. We won't tell her if you like."

And she pushed two pennies into his hand. He saw that she was in extraordinary good temper, her grey eyes, under which were mauve patches, bright-edged as diamonds. The bar was open as he made a slow, almost funereal way through it. A resolve was at the back of his mind but did not declare itself: he made his exit with only a vaguely troubled emotion.

For he never returned to the public-house. Daily it was before him, bright and tempting and full of gaiety. He scudded past its steps, kicked a ball on its pavement, played marbles in the road before it. Garlanded with light in the evenings, the piano in the 'Commercial Room' sometimes rollicking out its strident songs, men singing, tales told in the bar, snatches of mysterious phrases over which he used to ponder interestedly—he ignored and forsook them all. He regretted the loss. The public-house had been a whole world of marvels and attractive discoveries, and he remembered that part of it with pleasure. And then something happened which made it disagreeable, which ought not to have entered into that particular world. One afternoon as he strolled

along the pavement, an upstairs window opened and Miss Sanders popped out her head.

"Hello, there, hello!" she called. "Why haven't you been to see me lately, you bad boy?"

Hesitating, he looked up but did not answer. She was smiling down at him, a smile of friendly mockery. He remembered thinking that the tower of her hair was in danger of toppling over. She was leaning out in such great eagerness, her bantering smile thrown down to him invitingly. He looked at her with curiosity but had nothing to say. Again asking for an explanation, she added:

"Well, at any rate, come in now. I want to talk to you."

He did not move. Suddenly she dropped a coin to him. "There's sixpence for you!" she cried, her smile breaking into a laugh. "Now come in to see me."

Picking up the sixpence, he began to slowly walk away, without comment, even to himself. He only remembered that for a long time he had wanted a certain penknife. Miss Sanders did not call out again, and when he reached the corner he made a sudden headlong dive out of sight.

The Two Friends

Out of the dark back lane that ran between twin rows of decrepit dwellings two women, shawled about the head and aproned respectably, appeared and passed under the corner gas-lamp, that slanted up from the earth like a long-stemmed yellow flower. The sky crackled with stars, but the November night was rough and blowy.

"Cold, Eunice," said one, stopping for a moment to pull up a cotton stocking. "I forgot my garters."

"Nowadays," said the other bleakly, "string I use. It keeps 'em up even though it cuts into the flesh and raises the veins."

"Garters don't cost much, Eunice," protested her friend, shocked.

"The price of a bottle of stout they cost," said Eunice flatly. "And I know which I prefer." She added defensively, "It's all that keeps me from pitching into the grave nowadays."

Gwyneth answered with a kind of affectionate whine to this, squeezing her friend's arm. "Don't you think of going before me, Eunice. Awful it would be here without you. Especially now."

"Aye," grunted Eunice in response, "aye." She was of harder, dourer disposition than Gwyneth, possessing a long, austere nose that had a constant amethystine drip. Her sharp eyes seemed always crouched in readiness to attack a dishonourable world.

Friends since they were children, reared next door to each other in a pastoral offshoot of the valley, the two had sallied forth during their girlhood to the near-by coal-mining district and got married to colliers. Those were new, exciting days, with snatches of prosperity. Now in disaster, with the pits closed and no money anywhere, they clung to each other as if in a foreign and hostile land. They had doleful conferences, in which they went over their advantages and grievances. Gwyneth had a tidy chapel-going husband, but a houseful of growing brats that she didn't know what to do with; Eunice was childless, but had a shifty, good-for-nothing husband. Over both women the common local spectre of unemployment had hovered for several ill-natured years.

Tonight they were taking another of their nocturnal excursions. There were few people about. Soon they were climbing beyond the inhabited places, leaving the lean rows of houses for paths that wound up the broad lower sweeps of the mountains. From the upper ridges a cold wind swept down gustily. Sometimes the two women stumbled as they climbed higher and higher. But both knew the path. The valley night seemed full of mystery and stealth. Gwyneth shivered.

"We could be taken for burglars, Eunice."

Both women carried under their shawls a canvas bag and a stumpy pick-axe. Also candles and matches. Eunice carried, in addition, a packet of cake and a small bottle of cold tea.

"Or they'd say that a grave we were going to dig," she answered grimly.

Gwyneth moaned, as if biliously. "The last year or two, Eunice," she whined, "always wanting to shove a grave under my eyes you are."

"It's what we're making for smart nowadays," Eunice replied, ascending with sudden brisk energy.

Gwyneth, clambering behind, bleated anxiously, "You mustn't leave me behind, Eunie! In the dark!"

Presently they reached a small plateau, jutted out into the swirling dark space like a craggy chin of the mountain. Here the wind sprang friskily, sometimes changing into a great sudden mouthful blown insolently from above. The women's skirts billowed, their shawls flapped. The valley far below, winking with lights, seemed in another country.

"Don't cling to me, gal," Eunice croaked, not unkindly. In these remote dark heights even she felt a little insecure. "We'll have the candles going in a jiffy."

At the back of the plateau, cut in the mountain, was a ragged hole like the opening of a cave. The women stooped to enter, feeling their way cautiously. Inside they each lit a candle. And there was disclosed a roughly hewn passageway, the roof sparsely propped with timber. Large stones bulged loosely from the sides. There was a damp earthy smell.

"When I think of the rest of the hill pressing on top," quavered Gwyneth, "and what we're risking——"

Eunice swiped her hand with an habitual movement under her nose. "Didn't the men work this level for months during the big strike!" she said. "It's safe as anything is in this rotten world. Get your pick ready, gal." She advanced down the passageway, stooping. Presently she was obliged to bend and almost crawl along. Gwyneth followed, feeling her way like a wary crab. The candle-light was wrapped close round their gauntly stooping figures. Ahead and behind them the thick, silent blackness seemed as though it had body.

"Here it is," Eunice muttered. Dropping pick and bag from under one arm and setting her candle on a stone, she squatted on her haunches.

Gwyneth panted after her. "We mustn't be long," she breathed. "Bad for my chest the air is here."

But Eunice was already at work. Before her, low in the cave wall, a thick vein of coal glittered brilliantly, black, blue, and silver, wedged among stone and earth. She set her pick smashingly into the brilliance and presently a small shower of the precious mineral fell crisply at her feet.

Gwyneth was slower in setting to. She had to fold her shawl neatly and turn her grey canvas apron. Then she knelt. There was not enough room to turn round easily.

"Keep your pick away from me!" cried Eunice irritably. But she herself, squatting, heaved her pick dangerously.

"What we're risking," Gwyneth panted again, "for a few handfuls of coal!"

"It saves us half a crown a week," Eunice pointed out.

"Oh dear," lamented Gwyneth bitterly. "Half a crown! Oh dear."

"We'll have a swig of tea presently," Eunice promised impatiently.

It was not long before there was enough coal to fill their bags; the vein was easy and generous. "Good coal," Eunice remarked with satisfaction, as she stuffed her bag. "Full of life; almost out of your hands it jumps."

"And bright as the stars it burns," sighed Gwyneth.

They heaved the filled bags to the entrance of the tunnel, dropping them there. Outside, the night had become rougher. Clouds were now blowing over the stars. Gwyneth went to the edge of the plateau and peered into the abyss of heaving darkness beneath her.

"I don't know how we'll get down with those sacks," she wailed. The fists of the wind were pounding against the mountains.

"Oh, don't worry," called Eunice from the entrance. "We'll get blown down." She was opening the packet of cake.

Gwyneth returned to the cave. Just inside, out of the wind, the candle-light gave it a cosy look. It seemed a peaceful habitation, remote from the world.

"A fire shall we light this time?" she suggested softly. "And stay awhile? We left some sticks and paper."

Eunice nodded. She would not have minded staying up there all night, being of a more adventurous disposition than her friend. And she had no particular affection for her home below, which, indeed, had done nothing but annoy and harass her ever since she married.

Gwyneth took from a shelf in the wall some thin sticks and paper. She laid the fire in the centre of the floor a couple of yards from the entrance, using small pieces of coal from the bags.

Soon a crisp red shooting of flame lit up the cave. The two women squatted on the ground beside it.

"We might be gipsies," Eunice said, satisfaction whipped into her voice.

"Always you wanted to be one, didn't you, dear?" remarked Gwyneth. "A pity you didn't go off with that roundabouts man that time. The one who asked you to have a look into his caravan in the fair—you remember?"

"Only three months I had been married then," Eunice said, with a certain amount of savage regret. She passed the bottle of cold tea to her friend. "I wish he'd come back now."

Gwyneth appeared shocked. "You couldn't go off now, at forty-one," she said severely. She surveyed her friend's worry-raddled face for a while in silence. Then she said in a hushed voice, "No good it is, Eunice dear, us expecting more from life. Our day is over." And she added lamentably, "Look what we've got to do to get a bob's worth of coal!" Her pale, puffed eyes seemed about to weep.

Eunice munched the plain currant cake before replying, and took another swig of tea out of the bottle. Lean and taut, she seemed as though her flame of life was only half choked yet. Her small berry eyes darted restlessly, though her cheeks hung down slack and wrinkled and her breast was woefully scraggy. "I'd like to go to jail," she said suddenly.

Shock quivered plainly in Gwyneth then. "You always had *cravings*," she quavered. She stared about her, particularly at the sacks of coal, resentfully for a while. She was annoyed. In a careful voice she went on to praise the cake. "I can't make it so light," she said tactfully.

"Yes, jail," repeated Eunice with grim insistence.

"What d'you want to go to jail for?" wailed Gwyneth. She had always known there were dark, obscure reaches in her friend's temperament, and sometimes she had been frightened of her savage outbursts against her destiny. And yet Eunice had always remained a respectable married woman, like herself. Battered, but still respectable.

"Because," croaked Eunice, with gaunt hopelessness, "because the only exciting thing it is that can happen to me now."

Two tears rolled down Gwyneth's smudged cheeks, and half a one remained pendent at the corner of her weary eye. Behind

her fear, she understood. She crawled across to her friend, the other side of the red-sparkling fire, and laid an arm along her shoulder. "Why don't you let yourself cry, Eunie?" she whispered rockingly. "Have a good cry. It washes things out."

But Eunice remained stark in her friend's sentimental embrace. "My tears," she said hardly, "won't come out. Behind they are, but they won't run out."

"A pity," sighed Gwyneth, trying to believe. "They're meant to come out."

The tea and cake were finished, and both women sat silent for a while, gazing broodingly into the soft red of the fire-glow. The candles dripped, the wind hurried past the entrance with much muttering and exclamation. But, inside, the buried silence remained undisturbed. There was a strangely soothing touch in that silence, and now that the women did not talk, it entered their hearts like a promise of perfect peace.

"Nice here," murmured Gwyneth at last. "Makes you feel you don't want to go back. No men, no children, no squabbling. No cooking scraps, and washtubs, and patching of old clothes." She sighed, bliss mingling with unlovely memories. "Let's come up here often," she suggested, "and forget the world for a bit."

"What's the good, Gwyneth, what's the good? Back we've got to go and live in that world, lousy as it is. Don't whine, gal."

But her friend knew that she, too, felt comforted and somewhere nearer to peace; she was never one to make a *show* of joy. Leaning against Eunice, slowly Gwyneth began to sing.

She sang "Watching the Ripening Wheat". The song about summer days and the doomed lovers among the golden corn. Her voice was a shabby, hoarse contralto now. But at one time she had secured a silver medal in a chapel eisteddfod. The voice sank wornly to the melancholy ending. "Now you sing, Eunice," she asked. "Something sad."

"It's bound to be," said Eunice with a bitter grin. And she launched into a slow, weird rendering of "All Through the Night," musicless and raucous. Nevertheless, Gwyneth was enchanted.

"Sweet that was," she said, stroking her friend's arm. And she began a soft singing of a Welsh hymn. Eunice joined in. They sang quietly, affected by the buried silence of the tomb-like space. They swayed together, arms entwined. Suddenly, Gwyneth broke into a piercing scream and with a wild flurry of skirts darted up

and plunged down into the cave. Framed in the black entrance was the tall and corpulent figure of a policeman.

"Don't go down there, you fool," Eunice called after her friend calmly; "you can't get out that way." She turned her head to the advancing constable. "Now what do you want, P.C. Price?" she asked severely. "Frightening my friend!"

"Very cosy you are up here!" exclaimed P.C. Price in his turkey-cock voice. "Aren't you now! Well, well. Singing hymns, were you?"

Down in the dark cave Gwyneth was still wailing and weeping. Eunice rose, saying: "Enough it is to frighten the life out of any poor woman," as she flung the P.C. an angry glance. She went to fetch Gwyneth, taking a candle.

"Why now, missus," P.C. Price called out helpfully, "not going to swallow you up I am. Come now." He sat on a stone, took off his helmet, and leaned towards the fire. Presently the two women reappeared out of the dark, Eunice urging her stumbling friend, whose eyes stared in dread.

"There now," cried the policeman; "don't you be afraid, missus."

But to Gwyneth, whose heart was sitting up like a roused hare, his exclaimed comfortings held a menacing quality; she leaned totteringly against Eunice's shoulder. And her fears were justified. Placing his helmet on his head, and speaking soullessly as a schoolmaster announcing something about the habits of caterpillars, the policeman said:

"Now, now. Four times you two women have been up here taking coal. Very well you know the Company that owns this property. They are going to prosecute. Others have been at this game. In broad daylight too. It is stealing. You'll be summonsed." He nodded portentously, lifted his bulk like a horse, and went over to the bags of coal and peered inside them.

Gwyneth suddenly loosened a shrill torrent of hysterical complaint. How were poor women to live? Were her five children to go to bed cold? How was she to boil a kettle to fill their little cold stomachs with tea? Who did the coal in the mountain belong to? Why, God, of course. Finally, she buried her weeping face in Eunice's dusty neck.

"Shut up," muttered Eunice proudly. "What's the good?"

P.C. Price had taken out his notebook and, very slowly, was

tracing words in it. He repeated them with his lips; now and again his pinkish-blue tongue leaped out as if to lick them away again. "Two canvas bags containing, roughly, sixty pounds of coal each. . . . Women were sitting round fire singing hymns. . . . Roberts complained of poverty and said her children had no food or clothes." He closed the book. "There you are, gals. Duty's got to be done." He looked out towards the black, windy night, frowning.

"What'll it be?" Eunice asked whippingly.

"Oh, very light they'll let you off. Ten bob fine each, I expect. But a summons there must be. The Company got to put a stop to this pinching of coal in the mountains."

"I shan't pay it," said Eunice decisively. "Not ten bob nor ten pence."

"You don't want seven days, do you? Perhaps fourteen."

Gwyneth clutched in anguish at Eunice's arm. Prison! But Eunice took no notice. Her head was lifted in exultation, her face shone. Gwyneth stared at her. What was she like? Yes, like that red-gowned woman in the stained-glass window in church, the one who had been given the torments and was about to go up to Heaven.

"Eunie," whispered Gwyneth. "Eunie, I'll come with you. We'll suffer together."

"You've got your children," answered Eunice dramatically, as if she were on a stage. "They mustn't be disgraced."

The policeman prepared to go. "You don't want my old company down, do you?" he said slyly. After some further cheerful observations he disappeared into the smudge of black at the cave mouth.

"He means," whispered Gwyneth, "we can take the coal as long as he doesn't see us."

One of the candles was guttering and the fire was no more than a plateful of glowing ash. Again Gwyneth anxiously took her friend's arm. The cave oppressed her now; its aloof peace had been ruined for ever. "Let's go, Eunice, let's go. Come home with me and I'll make some chips."

Eunice's lean body was still taut in exultation, and her nose, raw but proud, was tilted upwards. "Fourteen days!" she said with sombre triumph. "Peace. Shut away. Fed with somebody's else's food."

"Oh, Eunice," wailed Gwyneth distractedly, "prison it is, after all."

Eunice's voice rose until it rang in scorn against the cave walls. "What has our life been the last few years? Prison. Prison at our own expense. Every day dull as a pan of stale dishwater. No decent money and no faith in anything——"

Once more Gwyneth began to drop tears on her friend's meagre but stiffened breast. "Yes, yes," she wept, "I understand, Eunie. A pity it isn't a hospital, though. Myself, I've longed many a day to go in and have a serious operation."

Eunice half pushed Gwyneth away. "Well," she said, with a touch of malice, "enjoy ourselves we will, stepping into the box at court. Better it'll be than going to the pictures. Acting oneself." She shook out her shawl like a whip. "And I shan't whine, either. I'm going to be haughty and grand as that Greta Garbo. I've got my say to say, I can tell you."

Gwyneth allowed herself to be heartened a little by her friend's proud wrath. She dried her tears, but continued to sigh and wheeze. They decided to take the coal they had broken out of the mountain; they might as well keep what they were being prosecuted for. Eunice fixed her shawl, and, with help from Gwyneth, the lumpy sack was slung across her bony but sinewy shoulders.

"I'll drag my bag," Gwyneth said. "Not so sure am I on my feet as you are."

Outside the cave the dark wind sprang on them like monkeys. The mountain night had a look of eternity. Light would never break in such a place. The stars were quenched. From the plateau the women could smell the damp, writhing clouds. Eunice found the path instinctively and began to tread its winding length with unafraid feet, her arms raised to the load on her shoulders. Gwyneth followed untidily and insecurely, dragging her sack. The wind scrambled after them like a gang of small hissing furies.

Gents Only

I

WHILE HE WAS BUSY BURYING A WOMAN one June afternoon, Lewis the Hearse's wife left him for ever, going by the three o'clock train and joining her paramour at Stickell junction, where they were seen by Matt Morgan waiting for their connection. She left a letter for her husband, a plate of tart for his tea, and that sense of awful desolation a gone person can leave in a house.

What was in that letter no one ever knew, not even Lewis's sister Bloddie, who—for the news was up all the hillsides of Crwtch the same evening—came flying down from her farm up where the old B.C. tomb had been found. But from that afternoon Lewis was a changed man. Not that he had been a specially bright bit of spring sunshine before, though he was quite a decent-looking man in his way. His manner betokened a sombre nature which was not entirely due to his calling. Because of his reasonable prices and his craftsmanship in coffins, all the people of Crwtch respected him.

"A servant you'll have to take," Bloddie declared shrilly, and her bosom heaved like the Bay of Biscay because he wouldn't show her the letter. "Forever running down here I can't be. . . . The house she left clean, I will say." She looked at the uneaten tart—for Lewis's wife was Crwtch's best tart maker—jealously. "If that tart you don't want I can take it."

Lewis lifted his brooding head at last. "Take it!" he barked, so fierce that she jumped back. "And your own carcass too."

But what Crwtch never expected was the decision he came to the very next day. He tore down from outside his house the wooden tablet announcing his name and profession and in its place screwed a new one just painted in the work shed behind the house. This announced: *J. J. Lewis, Gent's Undertaker.* Seeing him screw it up, Daniels Long Time, captain of the amateur Fire Brigade and so called because people said his engine was always a long time coming when needed, stopped and asked: "What is it meaning, Lewis?"

Shaking his screwdriver, Lewis barked: "My last woman I

buried yesterday. From now on, men's funerals only." And he went in, slamming the door.

No one could believe it. For days it was the talk at every hearth, in every shop and pub in Crwtch. Everybody waited for the next woman to go. A man died and Lewis buried him as usual, very reasonable and the coffin up to standard. Except for this funeral Lewis had not appeared out of doors, not even to go to chapel. His sister Bloddie said he cleaned and cooked for himself, ordering things by his apprentice, Shenkin. At this funeral everybody looked at him inquisitively but could collect nothing but a bleak decision in the uprightness of his body walking behind his lovely crystal hearse.

Then Polly Red Rose went of old age. Licensee of the best pub in Crwtch (now carried on by her son), Polly was respected by both sexes and all creeds. Surely Lewis, who had often enjoyed a glass of the Red Rose beer, would not say no to burying her? The son knocked at Lewis's door. But before he could take off his black bowler and step inside, Lewis said clearly, not angry, but firm as a rock:

"No use coming in. See the plate outside? Gents only, or boys, and no exceptions, sorry to say. Good day."

Now, there was not another undertaker within fifteen miles of Crwtch, the one in Stickell, a stranger. And not only would he charge extra for travelling his contrivance thirty miles in all, but it was known that his carriages were shabby, being more used in a town the size of Stickell. Everybody knew how Lewis's coffins (to say nothing of his moderate charges) were not only good value but would surely last longer than anybody else's. And so, when the women of Crwtch began to boil against this reflection on their sex and solicited their men to do something about it, even the men more or less began to agree.

"If I was a man," Mrs. Hopcyns the Boot declared to her husband, right in front of a woman customer buying boots, "horsewhip him I would."

"Sore he is," Hopcyns the Boot said mildly. "Give him a bit of time to get over the Mrs. leaving him like that. Come round he will in a year or two."

"Anybody would think," said the customer, kicking off a boot and flushed from bending, "that men don't mind about it. Forced to bury Polly Red Rose he ought to have been."

"How?" enquired Hopcyns. "No law there is about it. Same as I am not bound to sell you a pair of boots!"

"Catching it is, is it!" simmered the customer. In Crwtch there was only one of all trades, except farming, so there was no competition for customers.

The first outcome of all the agitation, however, was that the Big Men of Horeb chapel went in deputation to Lewis. They wore their formal Sunday black, watch-chains, and umbrellas, and in array they looked impressive. Lewis received them readily enough in his parlour, where were the samples of wood, metals, and glass wreaths. But he did not sit down like them, and, before they could speak, he launched like a judge having the last word:

"Lord of himself a man is. Private his soul. Between me and my destiny it is what I have decided in the matter of my funerals. But this I will say: Not only to vex the women of Crwtch is my intention; vex the women of the whole world I would. Yet small of mind is that. This is my true reason—women will see there is a man at last who will not sit down under their carryings-on and shamelessness. A good example I have begun, in a time gone loose and no respect for the vows of the marriage day. No more now. I have decided."

The Big Men looked at each other, and it was plain there was no stout movement to contradict Lewis or attempt coaxing. At last one said, however: "But Lewis, Lewis, come now. Surely similar all are in death, and in a hearse there are no trousers or petticoats, properly speaking. The same shroud of Heaven covers all."

Another, who had a crinkled little old face like an old apple in the loft, added: "Yes, persons only in the cemetery and not men and women. No carryings-on *there*; the only place safe from such it is. Every door marked 'Private', and no back door either. Agree with you I would, Lewis, if the cemetery was a place of this and that; only right it would be for you to say no to taking women there. But surely it is not?"

"Obliged I am for the visit," said Lewis, far away. "Just now I am starching white collars." Indeed, starch was whitening his fingers, and he had the air of one with many household tasks to do.

No doubt at all a door was shut fast in his soul. For him no more the peaches and the blossoms of women in the world. The

Big Men filed out in the sunshine and adjourned to the vestry of Horeb to consider the manner of their report to their wives. . . . But Crwtch's protest did not stop there. The following week those ten of the business-men who call themselves the Chamber of Trade, meeting once a month in the Red Rose, sought conference with Lewis.

Though, as before, resolutely calm, Lewis made sharp interruption of their mild wheedling: "Look now, this you must do. Put a big advertisement in the newspaper—'Chance for Undertaker in Well-off Small Town. Present Undertaker Gents Only. Apply to Crwtch Chamber of Trade'. See?"

Reproachful, one of the members protested in sorrow: "A stranger in *your* business is not welcome, Lewis, and well you do know it. Surprised at you I am." And he added significantly: "Ointment for bruises there are always, and many in pretty boxes."

Lewis knew what the member meant. Under the special circumstances he would not become a social outcast if he took a fancy to someone and brought her under his roof, though in Crwtch this was the most abhorrent sin of all. But he said cynically:

"Ointments cost money, and down by half is my business. And will be for ever."

After the failure of the Chamber of Trade, the Society of Merched y Te itself made attempts. This society of teetotal women formed to spread the ideal of temperance was—no one knew why—of powerful influence in Crwtch and nobody willingly incurred its displeasure. The mother of one of its members having died, the daughter made great groan of the awful cost of the funeral by the undertaker at Stickell, with the coffin looking like one from a factory. The Merched, twenty strong, assembled one August afternoon and marched in procession to Lewis's house. But, apprised of their intention by his spy, Shenkin the apprentice, Lewis had not only locked and barred his door but had nailed a notice on it: "*J. J. Lewis. In Business to Men Only. No Others Admitted. By Order, J. J. Lewis.*"

It is plain that women of affairs, particularly when in concourse, would not be daunted by such a notice. They knocked, they rapped and banged, called through the letter-box and rattled it with fancy umbrellas, tactless as any reforming society can be.

There was no reply. Presently the noise was such—it was a hot day and tempers were rising—that a crowd of about two hundred collected, and from his cottage P.C. Evans the Spike telephoned the Sergeant in Stickell, putting on his helmet first. The Sergeant said that no man is obliged to open the door of his house to the public and that the crowd must be dispersed if it was creating a nuisance. Perspiring, Evans the Spike stepped out, went back for his baton, and then, after plunging into the crowd and enquiring the meaning of this uproar, gave the Sergeant's decision and posted himself in Lewis's doorway.

"Truth of the matter is," called one of the Merched indignantly, "supporting the sly old fish the men are. . . . A letter will be written!" she finished with great ominousness.

II

But it was Bloddie who moved in the affair with better craft. She became incensed that her brother persisted in deliberately throwing away good business. Some years younger than he was, she hoped to benefit one day from the tidy little fortune he could be making.

It was during a visit to her friend's farm over the hill one afternoon that she saw light—in the person of her friend's orphan niece who had just come from the mining valleys to work at the farm. About twenty, Lottie's lovely head shone fresh as a buttercup, and all her presence breathed strong of an obedient nature waiting to devote itself entire to a person. Though dainty-looking she had no nerves and was strong as an ox. Better still, there was a smile behind the naughty blue of her eye, and even better still, she had deficiencies—she did not like hard work, and her lazy mind seemed vacant and only waiting for the one thing to come along and keep her comfortable.

Bloddie conferred with her old friend, who had taken Lottie to live with her because there was no one else to take her. "Aye," agreed the aunt at once, "sweeten him up she could, no doubt. Welcome you are to her, Bloddie."

"Look how he used to be," Bloddie remembered, fired, "as a young man! No 'ooman in Crwtch was safe from him. . . . A man with extremes in his nature he is, evident," she added, putting her finger on his character accurately.

But how to get Lottie into Lewis's notice was the problem. Bloddie lay in bed of nights brooding. She was the only woman—for a sister is not a woman—who was allowed into her brother's house, and even she was treated with short shrift though he accepted the bit of green stuff or bacon she brought down from the farm. Then one morning she rose and said clearly to herself: "A new shock often kills an old one."

Thereafter she took to calling on Lewis frequently, always with presents for his meals, and even daring to follow him into the work shed that abutted on the back lane and talking to him while he made a coffin. Subtly she got to know this and that from his short grunts. One day, splashing the varnish down on a beautiful cut coffin—for Crwtch men still remained faithful to him and his moderate charges—he growled: "No good you keep coming here, Bloddie. Shenkin the apprentice can do my business for the house. Tomorrow, going by the first train to Stickell he is to buy wallpaper and a chicken in the market."

"Wallpapering the parlour are you?" she said idly. "Coffin for Josh Jones that is? A nice wood."

"Going to him it is the day after tomorrow," Lewis grunted, and drew the final brush with great delicacy along the lid.

"Would you bury *me*, Johnnie?" she ventured, very sisterly.

"No," he said.

But later he gave her a cup of tea (the first since his wife had run away, never to be heard of again), and she took it as a good omen of relenting and melting. She dared to stay until quite late that night and went out to the work shed again to fetch the bag of shopping she had left there. "There," she said, turning the key of the back kitchen door for him, "all locked up and everything done for you! Surely a woman in the house is a price above rubies?" She had even washed up and polished the grate.

"You be off now," he growled, reading a trade paper. "Your views don't carry weight with me."

The next morning, a mild October morning very sweet in the nose, Bloddie let herself and the girl Lottie into Lewis's back-lane door as dawn was breaking. She had left the door unlocked the night before. Lottie was giggling and very ready for the prank, being bored with the lonely farm. They crept into the work shed and Bloddie lit a candle. The lid of Josh Jones's coffin lay ajar on the beautiful varnished casket resting on the trestles.

"There!" said Bloddie. "And if you do your piece proper a man with money you might marry. Starved he is."

She moved the lid and helped Lottie into the coffin. She arranged the bright, cool yellow hair and the clean-ironed pink muslin dress that showed legs plain, and in the narrow frame the shapely girl looked like Heaven come to earth. Even Bloddie herself, lifting the candle, exclaimed in wonder: "Beautiful enough to eat you look, a wedding cake! . . . Now what are you going to say?"

Lottie, her long lashes beating her cheeks, repeated in a pleading voice: "An orphan I am and looking for someone to take care of me. Cruel everybody has been to me. Last night I ran away from the gipsies and came in by here. Die I want to, for the world I cannot stand no more." And she smiled a tearful and pleading smile—for the simplest girl can make a good actress when needed—and lifted her arms like swan necks. "My father's face you got, only younger. Kiss me and let me rest by here."

"Champion!" said Bloddie admiringly. "Now take patience, for a long time he might be. A big piece of work you might do for Crwtch, and earn a fortune for yourself too." She arranged the lid over the coffin as before, leaving a slit of space open, and put out the candle.

"Cosy it is," Lottie sighed. "There's nice the wood smells!"

But when Bloddie had gone and an hour passed without Lewis arriving, Lottie, of indolent nature and having been up early, fell fast asleep. The work shed was dark. It had only a small cobwebbed window in the shade of a tree, where a rising wind began to mutter and creak in growing noise.

III

Bloddie did not go back to the farm as she intended. She went to call on a friend in Mary Ann Street who cut dresses for her, and what with a cup of tea and one thing and another, time passed. Her friend made broth and afterwards they went to visit Mrs. Leyshon, who was confined of a son. In the afternoon Bloddie looked at a clock.

"Jawch, I must go now," she said, suddenly feeling excited. She bought a currant loaf in the baker's and then made quick for her brother's house. "There's pale you are looking!" her

friend said in parting. "Not well you are feeling?" But Bloddie did not know if she felt well or not.

Lewis, in his shirt-sleeves, answered the door to her timid knock. He stood aside with nothing special in the grudging cast of his face.

"Well," she said, expectant. "Things well with you today? Down to do a bit of shopping I am." In the living-room she laid the currant loaf on the table. There was no sign of Lottie anywhere. "A loaf of currant bread for you, Johnnie."

There was conversation on several small matters, Lewis grunting as usual, and she tidying the hearth, her eyes restless and her ears cocked to the ceiling. "Oh, Johnnie," she burst at last out of her dry throat, "faint I am for a cup of tea."

"Get yourself one," he said, surly. "I got work in the shed. That Shenkin haven't come back from Stickell yet." And he went out to the back.

She drank the tea quick for strength. And her queer excitement could be held no more. She went out to the back, down the slice of weedy garden, and peered into the open door of the dusky shed. A dribbling lit candle was stuck on a chest of tools, with Lewis sitting beside it polishing a brass name plate. On the trestle Josh Jones's coffin lay with the lid closed tight over it. Bloddie, stooping, twisted into the shed. Her knees were bending.

"Oh, Johnnie . . ." she began, quavering, in a small going voice.

In the candle-light his shiny little eyes looked up, occupied. "What now?" he grunted, and went back to his polishing. "You go and have your tea."

Breathing hard, she crept across to the coffin. Her hand came out stealthily and made to lift the lid. It would not move. The six big ornamental screws were brassy in the candle-light. "Johnnie," she whispered, bending and feeling her head go round, "what you screwed down the lid for?"

"Ready to go to Josh Jones tomorrow, of course. Lids don't jump about in my hearse."

She gave the coffin a violent push. But it did not budge. Sure enough it was full as an egg. Beating the lid with her hands, she shrieked: "You looked inside before screwing it down? . . . Oh, Johnnie!" she wailed.

"What's the matter with you, woman!" he barked. "Look inside

for what? The coffin's been screwed down since first thing this morning. You've been drinking!"

"Lottie is in there!" she screamed. "Niece of Ceridwen."

"I don't know any Lottie," he shouted, irritable. "That's enough now. I won't have you coming here in the drink."

Babbling, and her fat little fists without real strength, she began turning the screws. He called out to her to leave his coffin alone, but, still polishing the brass plate, he did not rise from his bench. Six screws she had to loosen. She flung off the lid.

The coffin was empty except for Lewis's big black ledger and many bricks. She spun round with a snarl.

"Oh, wicked old fox that you are, oh——" And this and that.

He rose tremendous, the shining plate in an arm, like Moses. "Out of my house with you, out now and till Doomsday!"

Sobbing in rage and fright, she ran up the garden, he at her heels. But she called up the criticism of hell on him, and he on her. In the living-room her eye caught the currant loaf. She snatched it up and took it with her through the front door, which slammed behind her for the last time.

Up at the farm she found Lottie in bed not only with a cold but with fright. Fed and comforted, however, the girl dried her tears. "I went to sleep," she related, "and I was woke up by candle grease dropping hot on my face. Red his whiskers were by the candle! I said what you said, but he shouted at me: 'A good mind I got to lock you up in this coffin till I call the policeman for a burglar! You be off back to the gipsies. Supply free nights' lodging for trollops I don't. . . .' And he wouldn't help me out of the coffin and wouldn't touch me at at all. I lost my head and said where I was from, too. . . ."

Afterwards the aunt tried to console her friend. "Let the old rascal go, Bloddie. A man he is no more. Cut off the old dolt is."

"Pew!" breathed Bloddie, stertorous, "but I thought poor Lottie had been coffined right enough."

"Never mind," said Ceridwen: "not so frivolous and empty-headed it might make her."

It was the last attempt to make Lewis Gents Only (as he came to be called) relent from his hard vow. He remained faithful to it until he retired from business and went to live in Swansea. All women continued to be buried by the Stickell undertaker, but the man who bought Lewis's business and stock in hand of course

changed this. It must be said that though mention of Lewis always made Crwtch women bridle, when he left he went in dignity and with the good wishes and respect of most men. He had that upright look of a man who knows his own mind and abides by its decisions, and in his face independence mingled solemnly with the natural pride of a craftsman. His history is still discussed in the parlour bar of the Red Rose; and it is often the starting point of a deep debate—was he justified or not in refusing to undertake women?

Conflict in Morfa

I

Priscilla Edwards was a woman of some consequence in the village of Morfa. A Christian soul and deeply religious, she possessed a prosperous farm and was rich from a family inheritance. She remained single (after rejecting many suitors), she worked and governed her farm with an energy and art equal to any male's, she owned many of the village cottages, employed many men and girls, and at Christmas gave everyone a pair of boots—nailed for the men and buttoned at the sides for the women.

At the time of this tale Priscilla was gone forty and had a tall and tight body whose members never ailed or tired, and a lean face with plainly defined features. She was a woman with a Will and a Way, and she contributed largely to the expenses of Soar, the little Methodist chapel of Morfa. There, however, she had lately come into conflict with the new minister.

Mr. Vincent Thomas-Thomas was not admired in Morfa. He was not a native of the district and his sermons were of a cold and calculating kind, quite unlike those of his deceased predecessor, the fiery and native Noah Williams. His nature, too, was bossy, and he thought Priscilla interfered too much in the chapel affairs. But because of her contributions to Soar, he was obliged to allow her much licence. It was only when Priscilla desired to bring her

pet cow, Alice, to chapel for the Sunday-evening service that their enmity became active.

II

All the creatures of Priscilla's farm held their mistress in esteem. The swine grunted at her affectionately, the geese stretched excited necks for her caress, the hens gurgled blissfully when she was near, the two horses twitched and quivered at her voice, the cows and bulls looked at her with eternal worship in their luminous eyes. Priscilla, going among her stock, changed her personality according to the creature she addressed, and she had the happy and rare knack of successfully establishing contact with these different forms of low life. When she clucked amid her hens she became of their mentality, and indeed as she fed them she would excitedly hop about in their fashion and dart her neck hither and thither, uttering a cluck that was not to be distinguished from a hen's. Her imitation of a pig's snort was as successful too. Sometimes, at some entertainment in the village, Priscilla could be induced to give a recital of farmyard noises, and she was often told she could earn a fortune in a circus.

Priscilla's favourite creature was the cow, Alice. Alice was an old member of the farm's family and had lovely patches of rich burnt-umber on her ivory coat. Her teats were vigorous and she had been a wealthy creature in her time, of great financial value to Priscilla. Milk-produce apart, though, a deep affection and understanding existed between the two. There was a special and sincere caressive quality in Priscilla's behaviour towards Alice, and the cow showed its sense of the honour by returning a firm but respectful love for her mistress. Her melancholy cry when Priscilla would leave her field or shed told more than any lament of poet separated from his mistress. Her perfect repose when Priscilla milked her or stood near her had something eternal and mystic about it, her eyes then becoming soft-coloured like dog-roses. But she never took any liberties: throughout their long association Alice never once attempted to touch her mistress with head or foot—and never once played a naughty prank. She behaved with respect and consideration whenever Priscilla was near.

Lately, however, Alice had begun to develop idiosyncrasies.

She would follow Priscilla from field to field, she would utter her grieving cry often and often, especially when the mistress went among the other creatures of the farm. She came up to the farmhouse one day and put her head in the doorway, crying piteously. She was getting old.

"Let her," said Priscilla to Job, one of her men, "to roam where she is pleased. Only no place is there for her in the house. Small are the rooms and a nuisance she'd be indoors."

"Indeed now," said Job, "satisfied with the shed she's been up till now and sociable enough with the other cows. But yesterday she did put her old head low and shout at them. Peevish she's getting."

"Don't you say such a thing," exclaimed Priscilla, suddenly angry. "If my men and 'ooman servants served me as well as Alice has done, a rich lady would I be today."

Priscilla was fond of elevating the animal kingdom to the disadvantage of man.

Then it was that Alice followed her mistress to chapel. The service had progressed beyond the first hymn and Mr. Thomas-Thomas was on his knees praying when Alice's mooing plaint was heard in the porch. Throughout the prayer—for no one would move while the preacher was on his knees—the cow continued her call to her beloved. Priscilla left her pew, after Mr. Thomas-Thomas had risen with an indignant face, and went out to the beast.

How Alice knew her mistress was in the chapel only a cow can tell. But when Priscilla appeared, the beast immediately lay down in the porch and was prepared to be at peace with the world.

Priscilla looked at the cow.

"It shall not be for me to deny you the word of God," she said to Alice.

And she took a chair and sat by the cow's side, there in the porch of Soar, for the remainder of the service, which they both could hear distinctly enough through the wooden partition. When the service was over and the people came out, Priscilla said to them:

"Look now, people of Morfa, there's an example for you! My Alice has come to chapel though never was she taught to! There's real Christian feeling for you, there's extraordinary! One converted cow is worth six dozen converted humans, surely?"

III

The following Sunday Alice repeated her visit to the chapel, and again Priscilla was obliged to leave her pew and comfort the cow in the porch. But after the service Priscilla waited for the minister and announced to him:

"Mr. Thomas-Thomas, a place we must find in the chapel for my cow Alice. No pleasure is it for me to sit out here in the porch with her, especially with the cold weather coming on now, indeed."

Mr. Thomas-Thomas stood back a little way and gazed at Priscilla, his whiskers twitching. His green and righteous eyes protruded angrily. He held himself in leash, however, and said to the rich Priscilla:

"Come you, Miss Edwards, a surprising thing to ask is this. Tie Alice up you must, indeed, on Sundays. No business has she to come to chapel. Soar was not built for cattle at all. Well, well, you be reasonable now, whatever——"

Priscilla stepped up to him, while Alice waited outside the chapel door, watching but amiable.

"Deny the gospel to her will you, then?" she demanded in shocked amazement. Know you do how she has come to chapel of her own will on two Sundays. The first to welcome this miracle you should be, Mr. Thomas-Thomas. There's a lot of preachers would be proud if they could convert a cow! Surprise me you do." Cat-like she watched the angry, turtling minister.

"I am not licensed to preach to cows——" began Mr. Thomas-Thomas.

"Very well," snapped Priscilla. "Not ashamed of my cattle am I. And a respectable well-behaved cow Alice has always been. Where I am, there she has a right to be. Quite convenient would it be for her to rest in the space that is near the back-window of the chapel, and no nuisance would she be there. But the minister you are and *you* must say what is to be done in this matter. . . ."

Mr. Thomas-Thomas understood. It meant a large drop in his already meagre stipend to lose Priscilla. His neck swelled, his hair moved, and he said:

"I will call a meeting of the deacons to discuss the matter, dear Miss Edwards. Too important it is for me to judge it alone."

Priscilla tightened the purple sash at her waist and turned away.

The cow, after glancing at the red-flushed preacher, followed her mistress contentedly. Priscilla called at many of the cottages as she made her way to the farm, Alice waiting at the gates with benign patience. Priscilla talked to the cottagers, many of whom she employed, and hinted at the extra gifts she intended disributing next Christmas. Over the matter of the cow Alice she received much sympathy. And it was agreed that the new minister was a stern and bullying man, not fit to preach to good country people and quite unable to understand the ways of cattle.

IV

Mr. Vincent Thomas-Thomas paid a visit to Priscilla a few days later. He wore his best frock-coat and top hat and he carried an umbrella and white woollen gloves. Lowering himself carefully into the armchair in Priscilla's parlour, his chin was held up fashionably by a high and clean white collar. Priscilla felt the importance of this visit and, after giving the preacher a glass small beer, appeared in a scarlet silk blouse and a skirt of crêp The weather and other small subjects disposed of, Mr. Thoma Thomas opened:

"Well now, Miss Edwards, last night the deacons met on the matter of your cow Alice——"

Priscilla smoothed out her skirt and waited with pursed-up mouth. The preacher sighed and continued:

"Never before has a problem like this come into my chapel life. No consideration for cattle has there been, in my knowledge——" Again he stopped and looked at Priscilla with a sad hop in his eye, but seeing the gathering firmness of her mouth's aperture, he mopped his brow and went on, "Odd it has seemed to me, and lacking in Christian feeling, but a man I am after all and liable to err in judgment. Respect I have got for you, dear Miss Edwards, and in much respect do the deacons hold you. Willing they are that you can have the cow Alice in the space at the back of the chapel and willing am I. But it has not seemed proven to me that Alice has been converted and wishes truly to hear God's Word as it is spoken in Soar. So shall I ask you, dear Miss Edwards, for a small proof of the cow's religious feelings?"

Priscilla stood up. Her hands firmly clasped over her stomach, she answered with dignified unction:

"Mr. Thomas-Thomas, a little surprising you are, but not my business is it to dispute the wisdom of a preacher. Not for me is it to remind you that the Lord Himself created cattle such as Alice and saw that it was good, not for me is it to talk of Noah, who worshipped the Lord amid the beasts in the Ark, not for me is it to remind you that the little Jesus was born in a shed of cattle. Not ashamed of these nice beasts were the good holy people of olden days . . . Ha, rather would I go to Heaven riding on a cow's back than as a 'ooman wedded to many a Christian man of today!" She paused to draw breath, and went on smoothly: "Yet, perhaps wise in your doubt you are. But the proof that you ask shall be given you, whatever. Alice is resting now, for she has been milked, and drowsy she'd be. But come you up tomorrow afternoon and the proof that you ask shall be given, indeed."

Mr. Thomas-Thomas lifted himself out of the chair.

"Very much thanks to you, Miss Edwards fach," he said with perfect politeness. "Well now, if the cow is taken to religion, as no doubt will be proved tomorrow, who am I to dispute it? . . . Good-bye now, then, and let me say how glad I am that you are so zealous in sacred matters. A pleasure it is to know such a woman."

Priscilla acknowledged the compliment with a righteous inclination of the head. And the preacher left the farm with a stately step.

In the village, however, he met a crony to whom with anger and denunciation he related the conference, concluding:

"But triumph yet I will. Not thus will I be insulted for long, and not long will the old cow be allowed her way."

"A difficult and crafty woman to handle is Miss Edwards," said the crony, "and very fond of Alice she is."

"Tut, how is she to prove the dirty beast is religious?" said, with great contempt, Mr. Thomas-Thomas.

V

Priscilla, Mr. Thomas-Thomas and Llew Lewis, a deacon, made their way to the field where Alice lay the next afternoon.

As they approached, Alice politely rose to her feet and held her head low as though in pious modesty, turning her eyes humbly to her mistress. Her tail lay still and submissive.

Priscilla had declared that the cow would kneel at the sound of any prayer. She stood with her hand laid affectionately on the beast's flank and said confidently:

"Recite you a little prayer, Mr. Thomas-Thomas. Go you on your knees as you do in Soar and speak you to the Lord. Alice will join in. "

The preacher placed his handkerchief on the turf and knelt, and Llew Lewis did likewise. Mr. Thomas-Thomas began a prayer, thanking God for health and the sunny weather. Priscilla's hand tightened on Alice's flank; she gave the skin a little pinch. And lo! the beast bent her fore-legs and remained on her knees, her head hanging down in an attitude of devotion. Priscilla followed. Mr. Thomas-Thomas's prayer shook, he lost the thread of what he was saying and ended in a mumbling voice. He got up, his eyes fixed savagely on Alice, and when Priscilla rose, the cow lifted herself too. Llew Lewis exclaimed:

"Indeed, indeed now, remarkable is this. The cow is a wonder! And glory be to God that I have witnessed such a miracle! Who can tell but that a new time is come upon us? Jesus Christ was on earth to save mankind, and perhaps the sacred beast who will save *her* kind is Alice. For surely she is a most pious creature and is behaving remarkable. There's a godly example she'll be to other cattle."

Mr. Thomas-Thomas's Adam's-apple rose and fell as he tried to master his rage, and at last he said, with a sinister glance at Priscilla:

"An extraordinary doing is this for a cow. In olden days said it would be that a witch has been at work here in black behaviour. But surely a spell is on the beast right enough."

"A spell from the Lord!" Priscilla said sharply. "As anyone with a pious mind can see."

VI

So Alice accompanied the triumphant Priscilla to Soar. Every inhabitant of Morfa waited before the chapel for the arrival of the two. They came quietly down the road from the farm like any other peaceful worshippers making their way to their weekly devotions. But for the Sabbath Priscilla had tied a bow of purple silk ribbon on each of the cow's forelegs and a length of the same

rich material round her neck; and everyone felt it was right and proper that the beast also should have suitable array for attending chapel. Priscilla was congratulated on her good taste and thought. The two entered Soar with quiet and reverential step, Alice glancing at her mistress for the initiative. A quantity of bright yellow straw had been laid down in the space at the back of the chapel, where the pews terminated: and there was a chair for Priscilla, for she wanted to sit near her companion. Priscilla knelt for a moment's silent prayer and the cow did likewise. They rose almost simultaneously, and a sigh of awe and surprise went over the chapel.

Throughout the service Alice conducted herself with a grave deportment proper in any Calvinistic Methodist. She lowered herself and rose with diligent activity. During the sermon she reposed on the straw, and kept her head lifted in wakeful patience. Her entire conduct was above reproach. Priscilla was quite correct when she declared that Alice's manners in public were equal to any human being.

Mr. Thomas-Thomas made no reference, in his sermon, to the miraculous conversion. Indeed he never as much as glanced to the corner where the beast lay. But he preached a sermon of rigid and austere dignity, his face opulent with condemnation, distaste and wounded vanity. And more than ever the people disliked his preaching. There was no power or spirit in his sermons at all.

VII

And it was not many months before Mr. Thomas-Thomas, unable to bear the criticism of Morfa and mortified at the triumph of Priscilla, resigned from Soar. His successor was a preacher after the heart of the people, a man who had been born and bred among them and was of their nature, and who had a proper reverence for Priscilla and her religious cow.

To the day of her death Alice remained a respected member of Soar. She died of a pneumonic complaint, having taken cold one bitter November day. Priscilla, happily, is still with us.

Pleasures of the Table

I

"We had arrived," Sabina sang out, "at the third chapter. Where Mr. Darcy's manners disgust the Meryton ladies."

Flora, propped up in the tall chair, did not reply, and her cousin, easing herself the other side of the fireless hearth, began the evening's reading. Though she was very hungry, she read for an hour in that piercing, dominant and avaricious voice which, coming from such a shabby and even dingy old lady, surprised people. Totally unsuited to Jane Austen's prose, the voice was so shrill that it carried through the thin, rickety wall to next door, where Mrs. Flook remarked to her husband: "She's begun again. I wonder poor Miss Flora can stand it every evening, ailing like she is."

But Miss Flora, besides being too short-sighted now to read herself, was hard of hearing. Really it was very kind of Miss Sabina to go on and on, entertaining her cousin with their beloved author's works.

Tonight, however, Flora appeared not to be listening at all. A cushion lay on the chair under her head, and over her head a tattered bandanna silk square was spread, completely covering her face. In her lap her yellow hands lay very still. Flora might have been taking a nap. But Sabina was not incommoded by this seeming lack of attention. During the last few years there had not been many evenings when she missed reading a chapter or two of Jane Austen. Not only had it become one of her habits which it would upset her to break, but she obtained great personal satisfaction in going over and over again those wonderful scenes familiarity could not stale: Jane Austen was a haven of security in an oppressive world. Flora could attend or not; it did not matter.

Otherwise they were a quarrelsome couple, bound together by habit, necessity and the remnants of a great esteem. Peering resentfully, Flora was apt to drool: "Sabina, it looks to me as if you'd got the lion's share of the pudding again." A purple-red would mottle Sabina's face. "Take it, Flora, take it all——" and

she would push her plate across the table, her fingers scuttling like crab claws and her acrid voice so haughty that poor Flora's feeling of being ill-used, because her wits were not quite what they had been, would fritter down to a grizzle: "There's no need to get offended, dear. But I don't seem to have enough to eat. Can't you make a bigger pudding?" "We can afford to, can't we!" Sabina would reply harshly. And behind her pince-nez her flat eyes sidled: they might have drawn their occasional malevolency from the brutalities of life itself.

But in the evenings such irritations vanished from their day. Jane Austen calmed them. Her works held something of their old rightful world. The very volumes were inherited: the thick pages with spacious margins, and grandpapa's bookplate with its engraving of 'The Priory' where every year right up until they were twenty-three they had spent an unforgettable summer month. Those months had set a standard toward which they must always aspire. Ah, 'The Priory' with its oval pond, weeping willows and stone balustrade! Mistresses of such a domain, still in reverie they swept about the yew paths, cutting a bloom of the clematis trailing from the grey urns, sauntering to gather the morning's roses. Those were the days when the world was sane and safe.

At eight o'clock Sabina closed *Pride and Prejudice*; they kept country hours. "Well, Flora," she called shrilly, "I'm going up to bed now. I'll just have a slice of bread and cheese. It's not worth laying supper."

She did not wait for a reply. She went into the dark, damp larder. Her hand knew exactly where to find the toffee-tin containing crusts, and the wedge of cheese. She ate in the darkness, under the slate tiles of this lean-to, tearing the crusts with her rimed and much-ringed hands, biting into the block of cheese, and knowing in hostility the empty shelves around her. But tomorrow she would be fetching the pensions. Hers and Flora's.

Singing out "Good night, Flora," but without a glance at the unmoved figure in the chair, she took her candle and tramped upstairs. Next door, Mrs. Flook, eating pressed beef and pickles with her husband, heard and remarked for the hundredth time: "Goodness, how her voice carries!"

But the two houses, sagging to each other as if for support in their decay, were so cheap: the Flooks were only tenants but the cousins were owners. People came and went next door, but

the cousins had been there since paint, new brick and unrotted wood gave the twin houses that flashy and sprightly look such architecture wore at the century's first years, with the Boer War over and people expecting to settle down to prosperity. The village too was still a true village then, and no scatters of bus-tickets, cigarette cartons and paper bags blew over the Green. Who would have thought the slovenliness of the town would have reached so far! Now self-confident villas, racing motor-cars and bustling young men with squealing shrimpy girls used the place as a convenient 'country' retreat. The cousins, having bought their house with half their capital, deplored. But this vulgarity had also brought to them a brief season of prosperity.

Sabina lay in her bed. Her teeth lay on the grime-blotched marble washstand. She was still hungry. Her gums gripped together, she thought, as was her wont in bed, of the past. Of the lodgers they had had. She cackled, she frowned. Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson, indeed! A man of his age and a slip of a girl! Coming for their beastly week-ends, too wary to go to an hotel. But at last she had given them to understand what she thought of them. . . . . But there had been proper lodgers too, though they had never stayed long. Clerks in the town who wanted to live in the country and caught the morning bus with their breakfast still in their mouths—for, she had to admit, neither she nor Flora liked getting up so early.

All in all, the lodgers had brought money. There had been good food in the house then. They could even afford a daily cleaner. This was a tremendous relief; both she and Flora found pails and scrubbing-brushes abhorrent. Flora indeed had complained quite recently of the dirt in the house, when no one ever came to see it.

Hearing Mrs. Flook tramp upstairs next door, [illegible] screeched loudly: "Flora, aren't you coming to bed? Flora!" And, like a reproachful parrot: "Flo-*ra* darling, you really must come up!"

II

"Flora, nine o'clock. . . . Flo-*ra*!"

Her cousin, whose bedroom was next to hers, did not reply. But Mrs. Flook's broom could be heard. Sabina yawned and lay for a while in the greyish feather bed, staring musingly at the

stained violet serge skirt flung over the brass bed-rail. She'd wear her sage-green today, to fetch the pensions and to . . . She chuckled. Her tongue stroked her dry gums; she opened her eyes wide, wider. The ashen October light crept into them.

Out of bed, she slipped her teeth in. She'd need them today, she chuckled to herself. Going downstairs, she opened the door of the back room and stood pondering for a minute, hulked forward as she gazed vaguely into the dim room. She heard Mrs. Flook go out to her shopping.

An hour later Miss Sabina herself stepped out into the morning, carefully locking the front door. She had spent some time on herself, and when she reached the Green the passers-by were startled. Miss Sabina at any time abroad in the air was now an unusual sight; the cousins seldom went even to church nowadays, and everybody, including the Rector, had given up calling on them, respecting their obvious wish for complete seclusion in their poverty. Miss Sabina's only trip was a weekly visit to the post-office-shop across the Green, where she collected her own and Miss Flora's old age pensions and bought their meagre food.

Today she had dressed up. There were daubs of crimson on her bony cheeks. Her lean neck was white with powder. A heavily braided green skirt of billowing proportions flowed from a saffron blouse and a waist-belt of linked fanciful metals. For protection against the October chill a plump coat of copper-tinted bombazine reached down to her hips. Her corsage contained numerous antique ornaments, her large hat masses of faded flowers, a blue bird and a yellow plush apple. Angular and tall, she swept along with surprising energy to the Post Office and greeted the postmistress with a smile of piercing but deferential sweetness. She took out of her bag the two old age pension books. The postmistress, stamping the books, asked after Miss Flora's health.

Miss Sabina's high voice broke in a breathless cackle: "My cousin is much the same. Nothing serious, but I doubt if she will leave the house now until the winter is over."

Miss Andrews made a sympathetic comment and paid out the two pensions. Miss Sabina looked at the clock. And a few minutes later two gossipers on the Green were surprised to see her climb into the twelve-thirty bus for the town. It was the first time in livin memory that either of the cousins was known

to leave the village. What in heaven's name had happened?

Miss Sabina herself displayed no discomposure. She was too delighted. Her bright cheeks became quite puffed in excitement and her eyes sidled about observantly, now gaily, now scornfully. Those common new houses on Cuckoo's Ridge! Oh, they had built a public-house at Gallow's Tree corner! Luncheons and Teas! A little thread of saliva came from the corner of her mouth. . . . She turned to the conductor, pointing a be-ringed finger. "You see that Georgian house, young man? A bishop was born in it. Look at it now—*Teas Provided!*" Her own long woe was verified in that example of the world's decadence. The sprawling lack of design in the town's suburbs drew from her a hiss of contempt. But already she was smiling. Ten minutes later she stepped off the bus, hungry as a hawk.

Oblivious of heads turned to her, she was obliged to ask a constable the way to Grant's restaurant, for this new town with its crowded traffic confused her. At last she found Grant's, which was re-built and smartened unrecognisably. This did not upset her; it even pleased her. She swept down the long, shining dining-room and chose a table under an energetic palm. A perked-up waitress, divided between amusement and respect for age, stood beside her. Miss Sabina settled her pince-nez and, with no betrayal of her almost stupefying hunger, pored carefully over the ample menu card. She gave her order with ceremoniously remote little enquiries as to the exact nature of the dishes.

She ate. She ate a soup, a grilled sole and a steak garnished with mushrooms and small golden potatoes; she hesitated over a fancy cheese, rejected it, and chose a striped ice strewn with nuts and pieces of fruit. She drank a half bottle of claret; she took coffee, and then, brightly telling the waitress of her chest's condition, she ordered a brandy. The bill came to twenty-five shillings; Grant's had not become expensive in its modernity. Benignly she chatted to the girl about her job, left her sixpence, and made at once for the bus station.

She chatted even more to the bus-conductor on the return. Yes, she had seen some changes in her thirty-five years in the district; and not at all for the better, young man. Progress, ha! Had he ever read Jane Austen? Progress indeed!

Her arrival at the village came all too soon. As she descended on the Green and stood collecting herself, for a few moments

a shadow seemed to banish the brave crimson flags on her cheeks. She stood musing, her gaze sidling sideways. Then, hulked forward, she sailed across the Green, her skirts swishing. Down the lane and under the weary oaks to the two houses sagging against a grey sky.

Mrs. Flook was picking the last chrysanthemums in her front garden. Miss Sabina seldom permitted herself gossip with her neighbour. But today the acrid parrot voice sang over the fence, patronising: "A moderately fine day, Mrs. Flook. Those yellow chrysanthemums are pretty." The cousins' garden was a dreary mass of weeds.

Mrs. Flook, after a moment's half-averted glance, said: "Take them to Miss Flora, will you? Is she better? I have not seen her about lately."

"It is very kind of you, Mrs. Flook. My cousin is no worse, but I doubt if she will leave the house this winter." A few more courtesies followed. Miss Sabina sailed to her front door with the yellow flowers, inserted her key, and could be heard screeching: "Well, Flora, I haven't been long, have I? . . . Flo-*ra*!"

III

At last, in November, the Rector called. There was a local charity which allowed winter coal to the needy. He knocked three times before Miss Sabina came to the door, which, however, she threw back wide, immediately crying: "Come in, Mr. Brayshaw. You find me disarranged, I fear. My cousin is not particularly well today."

The grey, flat eyes, lying back in loose clots of flesh, pounced inquisitively on the parcel he carried. She ushered him into the front room, and she seemed to stoop in a kind of fawning obeisance. She was wearing her old violet skirt and a blouse, dirty and torn. But her voice was lifted in its parrot's note of shrill energy. Next door, Mrs. Flook, realising the Rector was within, felt relief.

Mr. Brayshaw's nostrils had quivered as he entered. A resigned-looking man, he undertook his parish duties with an efficient perfunctoriness. The village, corrupted by the town, had become nondescript; the old influential families had long departed; his own interest had dwindled. Going into the parlour with its marbled chiffonier, huge vases crammed with dry dusty

grasses, and photograph frames inset with mildewed plush, he did not sit down but launched at once, even hurriedly, into the formal business of the coal. He found the cousins needed and would accept the gift as usual. He indicated the parcel. That year's glut of fruit had encouraged Mrs. Brayshaw to make a tremendous amount of jam. Perhaps Miss Flora was well enough to indulge in some? And would she care to see him? He spoke as if he held his breath.

In the sullen November light, filtered through smudged panes and curbed by curtains hanging stiff with dirt, Miss Sabina spoke vivaciously. Accepting the jam with praise of Mrs. Brayshaw's housewifely industry, she rambled into an anecdote about a jam-making incident in her grandpapa's house 'The Priory', lost herself in it while she showed her gums in a cackling laugh, broke off, and said with a sudden exquisite hint of old-world etiquette that her cousin was resting, but perhaps he and Mrs. Brayshaw would take a dish of tea with them one day?

The Rector took up his hat. He wanted to tell her how he felt sorry for the cruelty of their lot, how he admired their brave battle in a changed world alien to their traditions. But there seemed no opportunity. Miss Sabina herself was so very talkative. Out in the dark odorous hallway there was a sense of closed doors and silence. Above the stairs one strip of mildewed wallpaper curled down scroll-wise.

The ton of coal was delivered in the middle of November. But people began to gossip about Miss Sabina's weekly trip to the town on the day she collected the two old age pensions. A villager had seen her in Grant's restaurant bent over a succession of dishes and eating so rapidly that bits of food dropped unheeded on to her clothes. A half bottle of wine on the table, there she sat fixedly unconscious of everything but the task in hand, yet about her a majestic remnant of an old familiarity with the pleasures of the table.

The weekly meal over, she never dawdled in the town but hastened back to her cousin. As she crossed the Green anyone could see she was anxious to get back, even the four women talking one Friday, in voices pitched to careful criticism, under the hollow oak that refused to die and every year put forth tough bunches of leaves on cancerous, staggering branches. In those voices was the unwilling admiration and the uneasy contempt

such feel for those who have fallen from their class and will not recognise the fall:

"She's been for her meal again, I s'pose. How can she do it on her old age pension? Mrs. Bryant saw her sitting like a duchess in Grant's with wines and brandies . . ."

"She must be blewing her own *and* Miss Flora's pension on one meal! But is it right she takes the charity coal when there's others needing it?"

They frowned uneasily over the problem. "I shouldn't wonder," mused one, "that they got a secret bit of money put by. Unless she's starving poor Miss Flora, that never could say boo to a goose"

Miss Sabina, voluminous skirts hurrying, passed dauntlessly into her lane. From wandering rough-edged clouds dribbled the last wan light of afternoon. Dead leaves drove over the oak's splayed feet and the wilted grass. Voices sunk in suspicion, the women prowled closer over their subject:

"Her neighbour Mrs. Flook was saying she wondered if Miss Flora has had a stroke or something. Miss Sabina's so brassy, a person could be falling to pieces under her very eyes and she wouldn't notice it."

"Living to themselves like that, they get withered. Feelings die in them. You remember, even when Miss Sabina used to go about a bit, she always talked about food. But I don't suppose Miss Flora knows how she stuffs herself at Grant's."

"Someone ought to get the district nurse to call. Poor Miss Flora! Mrs. Flook hasn't seen or heard her for weeks."

"Miss Sabina's not likely to let the district nurse in, even though she took the charity coal. No one's allowed in. Have you seen the window curtains? Heaven knows what it's like inside."

They nodded, but backed away in immediate uneasiness from this thought of domestic dirt. They began to try to place the date of Miss Sabina's hat.

A fortnight later, Mrs. Flook, deliberately in her front garden when Miss Sabina returned from the trip that had become the talk of the village, asked if it was true that Miss Flora had had a stroke. Miss Sabina blinked her eyes in surprise. Then she rustled in dismissal. She had that benign air of one who has enjoyed a good meal.

"Stroke!" she sang. "Certainly not. My cousin is still indisposed but hopes to be about soon. She requires rest and quiet, and *that* I see she gets."

Mrs. Flook glanced at the stains down the flowing green skirt. Miss Sabina briskly poked a rusty umbrella towards the Flooks' part of the roofing. "A tile is slipping out there, Mrs. Flook. You'll have the winter rains in." And she sailed up to her door, unlocked it, and screeched out the usual greeting to her cousin.

Mrs. Flook, a nervous, childless woman, was not quite satisfied. She often listened carefully to that dominant voice coming through the rickety damp-weakened wall. "What, you've laid the tea! You should *not*, Flora. . . . What's that? Speak up, my dear. . . . No, sit there. . . . No, dear, no, you must *not*." Rest and quiet, indeed—hard of hearing though Miss Flora was! But strain her ear to the wall though Mrs. Flook might, she never could catch the ailing woman's part in these parrot conversations.

That Miss Flora was downstairs and not bed-ridden was proved however by the evening's reading, which still came from the back room. Promptly at seven the voice was raised, swift, like a proud turkey swelling its long neck: ". . . 'Its greatest elegancies and ornaments were a faded footstool of Julia's work, too ill done for the drawing-room, three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies, for the three lower panes of one window, where Tintern Abbey held its station between a cave in Italy and a moonlight lake in Cumberland.' . . ." Miss Sabina was now deep in the calm luxuries of *Mansfield Park.*

One Friday morning early in December, the neighbour heard Miss Sabina burst into song. This had never happened before. It was a cawing rooky noise that yet followed a definite and happy melody. Mrs. Flook, pausing startled on her broom, could not catch the words. Then she remembered it was the morning when Miss Sabina drew the pensions.

Miss Sabina was dressing for her trip to the town, heedless of the spitting rain, the low, angry clouds and the bitter wind.

IV

The double rat-tat was impatient. It announced the demands of a bustling world that would be denied no longer. It was repeated. Next door, Mrs. Flook listened. It was she who had

given information that Miss Sabina undoubtedly would be home at that hour. She had not been able to stay her tongue any longer, and there had been a conference. The rat-tats went on, the letter-box was rattled, the door was thumped. Broken light came from under the scudding clouds. Dusk would be early. The knocking went on.

At last the door was flung open. And there Miss Sabina stood, drawn up like a war-horse, her long bony head swerving back. "Do you not know," she exclaimed with trembling hauteur, apparently addressing a great hostile mob, "that my cousin is seriously ill?"

The gas-man had retreated half a step, his nostrils twitching. Then he clanked down his bag inside the doorway. "I've been 'ere," he said, frowning, "three times. The meter's got to be emptied, ma'am."

He was plump and reassuringly middle-aged, a family man: not like those impudent young fellows the Company sent sometimes. Her glance sidled, curled round him, withdrew into flat silence. Then she stood aside. But, as he stepped into the dim hallway, swiftly she began chattering, in a torrent. She was obliged to go out a great deal now, to fetch things for her cousin. Mind the mouse-trap under the bottom stair. Oh, if the mice came upstairs! She and her cousin put traps all around their beds.

She opened the little door under the staircase. There was the gas meter. Heedless of her chatter, he unlocked it. Pennies, pennies, oh such a lot of them! She stretched out her hand in playful greed.

Half in the alcove, bending on one knee, he counted the coins. He had lit a torch; the yellow shaft of light fell on her stained green skirt and long bony hands. She bent over him. Behind her was the closed door of the back room. She chuckled jovially now. Had he found any dead mice in there? She had found a frozen one in the larder only yesterday. Still he did not reply, counting the pennies. Mice, she went on, did not get much nourishment in her house; why did they come, only to die? The almshouses were full of them, so she had heard. But mice couldn't be fed on the old age pension.

He muttered something and she bent down further into the yellow stare of the torch and screeched in his ear: "My good man, do not mumble. This is a country of free speech." And derisively

she cackled: "Let us be kind to each other, let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow——"

But he was getting up, pouring the pennies into the bag. Snapping out the torch, he heaved his plump solid body up into the dusk, lifted his head without looking at her, and sniffed. "There's gas," he said suddenly—"there's gas leaking 'ere."

She crouched against the door of the back room. "Oh no," she said animatedly. "It's those mice. Dead mice——"

He pointed a definite finger. "In there! It's dangerous, ma'am. You get so used to the smell you don't notice it." At last he stared at her, forcing his guarded eyes full on her.

She seemed to crumple. Crouched against the door, she called again in a high-pitched but beseeching voice: "Oh no, my good man. It's the dead mice." She laid a finger on her lips. "Hush. My cousin is resting in here; she is very ill."

"All the more reason, ma'am, for me to stop the leakage." Suddenly he went a menacing step towards her. "D'you want me," he demanded quite roughly, "to get *the sack?*"

Her eyes turned on him like a hare's.

"The Company'll sack me if it's found that I've neglected——" But she was kneeling against the door now, beating her hands on it. "He is here, Flora, he is coming! Keep still, there is nothing to fear. We shall not be parted. Do not look——"

His hand was on her shoulder; he gently thrust her aside. Crumpled, she grovelled on the floor. He stepped over her and opened the door. An exhalation met him like a blow. He went in a wary step or two. Lace curtains like ancient cobwebs entirely draped the window. But in the filtered light he saw a figure propped in a tall chair, a dirt-rimed cushion behind its head. Covering its face was a tattered bandanna square and in the lap shrunken blue hands lay, very still.

He backed out of the room. She was standing on the bottom stair, one bony hand against the mildewed wall. Once more she had drawn herself up proudly. Yet it was as if she was tottering. She was babbling something about old age pensions being too small. But those hare's eyes were no longer aware of the gas-man heaving past her.

He ran out, leaving the front door open, sped down the weed-filled garden and beckoned to four waiting women skulking against the hedge in the ragged light: they included Mrs. Flook.

Then he hastened to the policeman's cottage across the Green. By the time the women had entered the house, Miss Sabina had mounted the stairs and was in her bedroom. She had fallen on her knees, and the women's arms lifted her and laid her on the bed. They used the small compassionate words that soothe the stricken; they promised that all would be well.

A Man in Haste

EVEN IN PARDOE STREET, where a swarm of the valley's rougher population lived, Sundays usually passed mildly and without public mishap. Though judged elsewhere to be neither morally nor materially a good street, its hardest critics admitted it was not entirely without virtues; two or three of its families were of chapel-going habits, and five of its men were members of a well-known Male Voice Party that, singing in strict white collars, had raised money for charities and also won several prizes at those eisteddfods which so busily foster art. It was adjacent—and therefore was sombre on another account—to the Bwlch coal-pits, with a bruised swirl of mountain rising beyond and very enticing to thunderous clouds.

But one October Sunday morning the street's atmosphere, at least to any sensitive visitor familar with the usual placidity, undoubtedly contained an alien disturbance. Perhaps this was because men residents came out of their little dark houses much earlier than was their wont on this day of sloth and, squatting on their heels against the walls, conferred mysteriously with each other. And if the visitor had gone round to the backs he would have seen wives, grave of aspect gossiping with neighbours at nearly every fence dividing the so-called gardens. All voices were on the whispering note. But for the fact that people were never buried on a Sunday anyone would have thought that the funeral of a beloved resident had just set out.

Voices went on bandying such information as up to the moment was available. One house at the top of the street was the subject under discussion. Or, rather, its tenants were—Bryn and Alice,

married little more than two years and therefore not as yet solidly welded beyond the strength of the devil's interfering arm.

It had all begun exceptionally enough. The previous night, at about eight o'clock, Bryn had entered the Golden Harp pub at the bottom of the slope. Though at first he kept quiet, men noticed there was thunder and lightning in his face. It was a one-bar pub patronised mostly by Pardoe Street men and therefore almost a club. Bryn bought a pint without greeting anyone and stood staring fixedly at the Battle of Waterloo engraving framed over the mantelpiece. Luther Evans addressed him. "No choir-practice tonight, Bryn?" he enquired in surprise. For Bryn was a valued tenor of the Male Voice Party, and every Saturday, from seven to nine, Pennsylvania Bowen, the conductor, who was a celebrated martinet, kept them sweating at some oratorio or the Miscellaneous Pieces of the repertoire.

Still glowering at the picture, Bryn gave no reply. His swarthy demeanour did not deter Luther, who testily repeated his question, adding: "A tongue dipped in beer wakes up, they say." So far there were only a dozen men in the bar.

"Pennsylvania's got 'flu," grunted Bryn surlily. "I went down to the Institute and found a notice to say: 'No practice tonight'."

"No matter to sulk about, is it?" suggested Arthur Lewis. "Cheer up, sing to us by here you can, instead."

"I'll sing the hairs off your bloody heads!" suddenly snarled Bryn, creating a severe silence. He himself broke it by banging his pot on the counter and shouting to Mrs. Saunders: "Drinks for everybody. No one else is going to spend a penny in this pub tonight." And under everybody's startled eyes he took from the hip pocket of his grey flannel trousers a thick wad of pound notes clasped with an elastic band. "You start with a port for yourself, Mrs. Saunders; you're going to be busy."

All that money! The customers looked dumbfounded, even shocked. But in such circumstances men do not question the source of their pleasure. Others entered the bar and were instantly received by Bryn as valued guests. Rumour, especially when on lucky errands, can travel with magical speed, and it was not long before the room was packed, nearly all being Pardoe Street tenants and all of the male sex naturally, hard workers engaged in the Bwlch pits.

True, perplexed enquiries were whispered now and again.

Had Bryn got religious mania and taken out all his savings from the Post Office to give away? Had he won a Pool prize (but surely he would have announced this)? Been left money by an uncle who had owned a shop or a farm somewhere? He shouted, he sang (when the drink worked), he blustered. But not a word about the meaning of all this.

An even stranger action developed. Bryn took to handing out whole pound notes to selected individuals. "Here, Ivor," he said to one, "you want to get a bit of paint on the front of your house, don't you? Heard that old ape of a skinflint won't do it for you." He was referring to Joseph, the landlord of nearly every Pardoe Street house. Another tenant got a pound to "repair those leaky slate tiles," another got two towards buying a new cistern. Bryn seemed to be using the remissions of the hard landlord as tactful excuse to press a note on neighbours. The greater part of the money must have been handed out in this way, more than a score of Joseph's tenants benefiting. What with the processions of pint-pots as well the whole wad of notes had changed hands before closing time. There must have been well over fifty pounds in that wad.

Oddly enough, there was only half-hearted competition for the pound-note gifts. No doubt this was because of something peculiar in Bryn's manner, something which couldn't be assessed. Was there a bitter ring in his tenor voice, so finely sweet in many a Handel anthem? Did the red under-glow in his dark eyes rise from drink? But though he drank a very good share, he didn't get drunk. He seemed to be upheld by a power that kept at bay the mischief of drink, which can undo a man by creating either unlovely arrogance or sore distress.

Congratulations on a champion evening were showered on him. The men's instinctive delicacy did not allow direct enquiry: not one of them knew clearly in his mind, but all felt that Bryn had been celebrating a private occasion which was not necessarily of hilarious flavour.

"Bryn, we'll give it all back to you when the Christmas clubs pay out," someone told him, thumping his back on the road outside, which was black as the roads of hell. They all climbed the slope to Pardoe Street together. A chill air came down from the old rough-haired mountains. The others sang unfettered: Bryn was silent, and retained his carriage as he mounted the hill.

Reaching Pardoe Street, one by one they fell out and went in pleasantly to their hearths. To those wives who were without rebuke husbands related the strange occurrence in the Golden Harp; and many a pound note was honestly handed over. Doors were bolted for the night.

But residents were not settled many minutes beside their cosy fires when a clamour broke the silence of the road outside. As was usual in Pardoe Street, where Saturday night domestic disputes tended to become public, people at once came out, as if at first to examine the night's weather.

At the top of the street Bryn was turning his wife Alice, who was pretty but of frivolous disposition, out of their home. He flung her out like an old sack. With shouts of abuse. These she answered with howls which could have been of rage or despair, or both. But though people listened closely, no factual reason for this ejectment could be collected from the out-pouring. Bryn certainly called her hackneyed names to which through the ages women must have become accustomed. From other statements the listeners gathered that he was ordering her back to her mother, who lived five miles down the valley. And by that time the trams had stopped.

He slammed his door violently. She banged on it for a minute, and then, while the listeners quickly withdrew into their dwellings, she hurried through the street, wailing. She had never really been accepted into the bosom of the street, though Bryn was liked well enough. After this the night closed down undisturbed.

"Perhaps," suggested Llew Watkins, squatting outside a neighbour's house the next morning, "Bryn will come and ask us today for those pound notes back. Perhaps in a trance he was, last night in the pub, and thought himself the King of Persia."

Over the back fence one wife said to another: "She washes on a Wednesday, if washing you can call it. Judging by what was hanging on her line last time, no shape there is in her ways. She dolls up her face even on a Monday, and it won't do, not for married women. Thinks of nothing but the pictures and silk stockings."

By the time the church bell began to toll, no one was nearer the exact explanation of last night's events. Llew Watkins went off up to his hut on the mountain-side where he kept a vicious old billy-goat that had been famous in his time. Others went to

their pigeon-coops or chicken-runs: two set out to exercise their whippets. The few who still gave the streets its bit of tone went to chapel. At two o'clock Mrs. Lewis, who lived next door to Bryn, knocked at his door with a plate of hot meat and vegetables carried under her apron—"A pity for a man to go without his Sunday dinner," she said later. Opening the door after a delay, Bryn bore every evidence of having just risen from his bed, flannel trousers hastily drawn on. She hovered about for a while, making remarks, but nothing could be gained from him, though he accepted the plate.

At about four o'clock the two or three people hanging about their doorways saw Joseph the landlord enter the street. This was unusual. He always collected all his rents on a Saturday afternoon. But no doubt someone had promised to pay today instead, and he was a tight one for his weekly money, was Joseph. Thick-skinned and full-cheeked as a football, his neckless head wobbled on top of a hefty body. People said he could be a tough customer.

But this afternoon he walked into the street on one leg, so to speak, as if the other didn't want to arrive. One eye seemed to pop here and there suspiciously, while the other remained fixed in cunning determination. He hadn't become a rich man by sitting at home twiddling his thumbs. Under his arm he carried a brown paper parcel.

When he stopped at Bryn's door the few onlookers blinked their eyes with a start. Perhaps it was by occult divination that, after Joseph's rat-tat, more inquisitive persons appeared out of their residences. And at Bryn's loud exclamation when he opened the door they drew nearer to the dramatic house.

"Ha, there you are, you——" The something or other which Bryn called his landlord was lost amid his bellow.

Still more doors opened. And Bryn, strutting on his doorstep, plunged at once into warfare. No, he'd be damned if Joseph should come into the house—for the landlord, glancing back furtively at his collecting tenants, had moved as if for admittance—no, not while he had a couple of fists ready to knock anybody into the middle of next week or over that falling-down chimney-pot opposite, that was a disgrace to the street, see!

For a moment they measured each other. Both were more or less of the same short, thick build, except that Bryn was youngly

muscular while Joseph ran to fat. The landlord had seemed incommoded by his welcome. But he bucked and bridled now. "Your missus I want to see, not you!" he shouted. "She's been repairing my old trousers for me and lent me these instead." He held out the parcel.

"Repairing your trousers, you bandy old scooter, you!" yelled Bryn.

An unusual scene then ensued. Stepping off his doorstep, and in full view of the street, Bryn whipped off the dark grey flannel trousers he was wearing and flung them at Joseph's feet. Then he snatched the parcel, tore it open, and pulled on the pair it contained; they also were of dark grey flannel. Buttoning up and glaring, he shouted: "Satisfied? You've got your trousers, haven't you, and I've got mine. Now you get off!" And he pointed aggressively down the street.

"Wait a minute!" squealed Joseph in anguish. He had felt into the hip pocket of the pair flung at him. "Where's what was in it?"

Then suddenly it seemed as if Bryn's dancing fury left him. He looked at the landlord with a bitter jeer, a ferocious contempt. "You want it back, do you!" he said. "Man alive, if you was in London they'd cost you much more than that. Those countesses and janes on the pictures. Fur coats and jewels, hundreds of pounds! You get off now before I lose patience."

It was Joseph who then showed fury. But it was empty fury, with a lot of frenzied fist-shaking and threats of police action. Bryn stood square in his doorway with his jeer of contempt. The little crowd, in that way of crowds when the raw stuff of life is displayed, had got nearer still. Of course, everybody was glad to see the hard landlord taken down a peg or two, though it was still not quite clear exactly how this had come about.

"You'll be hearing more of this!" shouted Joseph, with a last shake of his fist. Picking up the trousers, he thrust his way through the crowd with threatening mutters.

"You'll think twice about it," bawled Bryn after him, assurance in his voice.

"What's it all about, Bryn?" asked Arthur Lewis in a soothing way. "We was all here to see if you wanted help with the gentleman," he added insidiously.

From his doorstep Bryn addressed them with some dignity,

still standing proud in his doorway: "A single man I am again; gone for ever *she* has. . . . This is how it was. I went down to the choir-practice same as usual yesterday, but there wasn't any. So I came back home. Nearly dark it was by then. No one there was downstairs and I thought she'd gone down to the shops. I went into the back kitchen and helped myself to a bit of bread and cheese. I thought I heard someone on the stairs, but didn't take any notice. Wearing my best blue suit I was, and after combing a drip or two of water in my hair I went upstairs to our bedroom to change into these flannels that old fox brought back today, so as to go down to the pub." The bitter note hardened his voice again. "I see a pair of trousers hanging from the pegs behind the door, where mine always are, and puts them on. But they didn't seem to fit quite right and I began to feel round 'em. . . ." His eyes became righteous. "Blow me if I didn't find a wad of pound notes in the back pocket thick as a hymn-book." That righteous gaze swept the closely listening crowd, most of them men who worked with him down in the pits, and he finished: "See?"

"By damn, yes," said Edgar Watkins, who had the quivering nose of a ferret. "Tut, tut, the old cuckoo of a rent-collector!" he added, severely.

Yet one or two of the others, perhaps because their minds were like the driven snow, still seemed puzzled. Emlyn Jones spoke quite testily: "Excuse me, seeing it I am not."

Bryn then said, glassily clear: "A man in haste, and with no candle lit, makes mistakes. That old stoat it was I heard on the stairs."

"But where was *she*?" impatiently asked Mrs. Olwen Richards, one of the few wives in the crowd. "Under the bed?"

"I never thought to look." The shock of the discovery still lay black in Bryn's face. "So upset I was. I just thought she'd crept out too till the dust settled. So I went down to the Golden Harp and blew all the money. See?"

With that he turned, went in, and slammed the door. It was clear that on the whole he still wished to be private with this episode that had altered his life. There were loud exclamations of condemnation of Joseph, of sympathy for Bryn and approval of his conduct. The women thought that Alice must have been living rent-free for some time; with wages in the pit what they

were, face-cream, scents and silk stockings could not have been obtained otherwise. The men felt justified in retaining their pound notes, to be used in much-needed house repairs. And they prayed that all this would be a reminder to Joseph that just because he was a rich man he couldn't walk into a decent street and behave like that without paying for it dearly.

Mourning for Ianto

THE DAY IANTO WAS TO BE BURIED blew cold and dour, the upper hills already covered with thin snow. His ten friends filed up the front garden of the cottage, looking very black in stiff clothes that had been withdrawn from boxes under beds, each wearing a flattish bowler hat pressed down tight over the ears. Ianto was going to be buried with what ceremony his cronies could muster; they had already paid for the coffin.

The hand bier they had hired was laid outside the door, which was opened by a cross-looking woman whose only sign of mourning was a pair of jet ear-rings, angrily swinging now. She was Ianto's landlady, a widow and maker of medicinal concoctions that were of dark reputation.

"You've come for him, I suppose," she said, her feet stepping restlessly, as if she were longing to insult them.

Ianto had died owing her much money. He had been her lodger for twelve years. Though she herself was not a smell of violets in the nostrils of the village, no man could say she had never paid her way in life, and none could say she spent her money swilling herself daft in the inn. She eyed the collection of men on her doorstep surlily now: the famous boozers well-known for miles for their drinking competitions. "Well," she added, "he's no sparrow for you to carry." She screeched when they scratched the coffin against her wallpaper.

They could see that she hated the way they claimed Ianto. Yet, soured, she would have no concern with his burial, would not contribute a farthing. Dying, Ianto had requested his old friends to bury him, and to mourn for him the same night in the taproom

of the Red Lion, placing a full pint for him in the middle of the table. "I'll be with you in spirit, boys," he had croaked.

Men of the local farms, they had taken the morning off and were prepared to make it a suitable festival, albeit a sombre one. Some of them were married to respectable women, the others wedded, like the deceased himself, to the buxom XXX ale that made their meeting in the Red Lion roaring programmes of fighting, sing-songs, storytelling, and various competitions. Four took up the handles of the bier after they had gently rested and strapped the coffin thereon.

"Aye," one sighed, "the old dame was right: he's no bird."

But they were sturdy men, and in relays surely they'd manage to carry their loved burden the four uphill miles to the cemetery. A hearse from the town would have been the thing, of course, but that would have been costly, and there was tonight's mourning in the Red Lion, as requested by Ianto, to be considered. Their pooled resources had left about thirty-five shillings free for this, and the money was safe in Merlin Evans's pocket now. A hearse or thirty-five shillings' worth of ale? Well, no true pal of Ianto would have hesitated. The four carriers staggering up the steep lane outside the cottage concentrated their thoughts on the coming reward.

"Funny it is," gasped one presently, "he ate so small, yet a man of tidy bigness he was."

"Don't waste your breath talking," panted another, sweating.

The others were already well ahead of them up the lane. Below, the grey cottages of the village scrambled among the bare wintry trees like forlorn sheep. Snow threatened nearer, preceded by icy drops of sleet; the wind blew. It was unfortunate that no more burials could be accepted in the crowded village churchyard; everyone had to go now to the cemetery opened by the county authorities four miles away, up amongst the hills, in a draughty green lap that this morning would surely be covered with snow.

At the top of the lane, though their half-hour was not yet completed, the four carriers complained of weariness. "Oi," they shouted to the others, "come and take your turn now. Sweating like old 'osses we are."

The others returned in shocked protest. "Giving in 'fore we're started, are you!" remarked Gomer Beynon severely. "He didn't

ought to be heavier than a bunch of dandelions if you had any guts for the job."

Redly truculent, one of the carriers, Ivor Roberts, shouted: "This old lane's steep and stony as the way to Heaven. Quarter-hour for those chaps on steep roads, half on flatter. So there! And," he declared suddenly, "I want a drink." He took out his heavy watch. "Pubs," he added obstinately, "will be opened in five minutes; the Duck in the Mouth's just round there, behind Williams's farm."

"Can't start drinking," protested Ellis Richards, though weakly, "'fore Ianto's buried. Now, now, it wouldn't be proper at all. Work first, play after." The others nodded severely.

"You carry him for a bit," growled Ivor, still panting, "and your tongue'll be dry enough to take to water! . . . Why," he demanded, gazing at the others balefully, as though one of them was to blame for some grave hitch in the proceedings, "why didn't someone bring a bottle of *cold tea?*"

But his angry irony was lost on his pals. Indeed, there had been no real objection to what he had had the courage to suggest. Only they thought it fitting that in such a solemn activity as a funeral they should demur a little. But the morning was truly cold and dismal. A short, quiet call at the first inn on the way to the cemetery would put fresh heart into them for their melancholy task.

"Well then," said Ellis, with an air of giving way to a fractious child, "well then, shall it be *one only* at the Duck?" His face, frigid as preacher's, looked round at the cluster of men, black-clothed as crows. "The wind," he added grievously, "is high and drying to the throat."

Some of the men, indeed, were coughing as if their chests were very weak. "The day," lamented swarthy Ebenezer Powell, "is cold as the bald patch on top of the world's head. Let us take a short comfort, as Ellis says. Ianto would have been willing."

So they laid the bier tenderly near the hedge and tramped across a field to where, in a tiny hamlet, an ancient inn crouched under chestnut and beech trees. In the snug oak-veined taproom they sat in two black rows either side of a long, fresh-scrubbed table. The innkeeper was surprised at this invasion and exclaimed, looking at their best clothes:

"Going to a wedding you are?"

"Ten pints, quick," Merlin Evans, the treasurer, ordered sternly. "We are burying a pal and got no time to waste jawing."

"*Eleven* pints!" Ellis said significantly. "One for the middle of the table."

They drank in silence, each staring now and again at the tankard placed in memory of the deceased. The silence became oppressive. They finished their drinks.

"What," muttered Llew Lewis, wiping his dejected moustaches, "what's to be done with that there full pint?"

No one knew. They stared at it in depression. "A pity to waste it," mumbled Gomer Beynon, scowling. "Ianto wouldn't like good ale wasted."

But no one liked to touch the tankard and drink its contents alone. They waited in uneasy nervousness for someone to speak up. It was Gwylim Watts, lean and not long released from jail, who suggested: "Tell you what. Order nine pints more and put them with that one for company."

So once more the treasurer doled out, sternly but not unwillingly. Heartened, the mourners presently trooped out into the cold again. Snow met them, thin but promising a greater abundance. The hills were curling into white waves. The mourners thought disconsolately of the cosy room they had just left. Would that Ianto had died some warmer week!

"Hurry up now," Ellis exclaimed, "else the storm will nip us like a fox at a chicken."

Another four grasped the handles of the bier and began to trudge, quite briskly at first, a length of flat road under a stout hill. Soon, however, there was a climb—a hard one, until the decline into the next dip in the hills began. They panted and snorted. The snow thickened; it ran into their eyes; it trickled down their necks; they sweated. Llew Lewis's tongue began to hang out like an exhausted dog's.

"Oi," he gasped, "help now! A small breakfast I had this morning and no nourishment is in me." So someone had to replace him.

The changes became constant. All complained of the unexpected weight of the bier; all cursed the callous snow. When they reached the next dip, where there was a hamlet and the Bunch of Grapes, without debate they rested their burden under

a white-filled elm and hurried across to the inn. Merlin took out his bag of money.

Warmed again, in a room full of brass ornaments and pictures of Victorian celebrities, they bustled into cheerful conversation. The tankard in the middle of the table did not oppress them this second time.

"You remember, chaps, how Ianto climbed tower of church and hung Betty Prichard's red petticoat on spire?"

"And Betty knocked him into duckpond with her broom. Aye, a lad he was in those days. 'Ow did he get 'er petticoat, asked parson, and wouldn't let Betty come to church after that."

"Aye, Betty Prichard," sighed Edwin Thomas, full of regretful memories. "Where's she now, I wonder? Went away to Cardiff docks and never came back. Pretty and quick as a squirrel she was. Skin pink as a wild rose. . . . I was going to court her once," he added defiantly to his pals' ironical smiles.

"The snow," observed Llew Lewis, peering broodingly out of the window, "lies heavy on everything."

But they had to set out again in the bitter, bitter cold. The greater part of their journey was still before them, and the snow was now stampeding upon the steep landscape. But they were determined; the sad job had to be done. Were they not the only human connections poor Ianto had possessed in the whole world?

Entering a village mid-way to the cemetery, without further ado they sheltered the bier in a convenient cart-shed and hastened into the Black Cow, a good pub well known for its rich, potent stout. Their faces blue and red, they sighed with satisfaction. But after the third round, Ellis, studying his watch with difficulty, urged them to their duty again. Outside, the wind seemed to have become ominously fierce, for the weakest of the mourners staggered as they went into it.

"Let us bury him tomorrow!" Gwylim bawled, "and stay here now mourning for him."

The others were shocked. To postpone such a sacred ceremony as a burial seemed to savour of blasphemy. They criticised Gwylim harshly. Gwylim, always truculent under certain circumstances, flung off his coat, struck a fisted pose, and invited someone to hit him.

"We will leave the rude ruffian behind," said Edwin delicately.

"No esteem has he for the sad business we are doing today."

Gwylim staggered after their offended backs, shouting in fear that he'd be left behind in the bleak, snowy village. At the next call, in the Crooked Billet, he wept and was obedient. Here, however, a long-standing grievance between Ebenezer Powell and Rowland Price broke out once more. Ebenezer had, three years before, sold a pig to Rowland which the latter declared defective. Presently they were hustled out by the indignant landlord, for blows were struck.

The party staggered on, fairly familiar with the whitened road. Some were slower than others and lagged behind. But all knew, instinctively, they would meet in the Rose and Crown near Lord Gilfach's place, and afterwards in the Travellers' Rest, the last inn before the cemetery. And so it was. The treasurer's bag of money was empty, but they scraped sufficient between them. And still they sacredly if vaguely observed Ianto's request for a memorial tankard in the middle of the table.

At last, two hours late, they trailed into the cemetery, wavering black-and-white figures panting untidily into the snowy place. The parson, who had been waiting for them in the cemetery keeper's cottage, complained severely, though he was not really offended. On such a cold morning the keeper had provided him with a bottle of his favourite cherry wine, and he had been sitting by a large fire reading a detective novel. But he looked in doubt at the cluster of swaying men outside the cottage.

"The storm seems to have knocked you about!" he remarked.

Ellis, their spokesman, kept on saying: "Beg your pardon, parson," and bowing; Gomer Beynon kept turning round and round, a human weathercock in the wind; two others had collapsed exhausted under snow-laced yews, and the others lurched about dazedly. The parson peered up and down the broad cemetery path.

"And the coffin?" he enquired suavely. "You have taken it to the graveside?"

Ellis stared at him with glassy eyes. "Ianto," he said with heaving solemnity, "Ianto was a good man, one of the best. All the way up the chaps been grieving sore about him. He didn't ought to have gone so soon!"

"The coffin?" repeated the parson.

"One of the best! Earth's poorer for his going, parson, b . . .

b . . . but"—Ellis seemed about to weep—but Heaven's the gainer."

The parson's benignity was thinning; he muttered to himself. But Ellis began to reach an inspired eloquence:

"Who should want a better pal in this world than Ianto! A kind word for everybody, and always a smile on his nice mug! He'll teach the angels in Heaven! Begging your pardon, parson." His voice sank. "And we have come now, his old faithful mates, to lay him to rest."

"The coffin?" the parson asked suspiciously.

Ellis, as though overcome by his grieving eloquence, stared in a tranced way about him. Merlin slouched up to him. "Parson wants the coffin," he whispered with care. Ellis chid him gently. "All in good time, all in good time," he said, very dignified. "Form procession to the grave now."

Rowland Price, who had been listening near-by in perplexity, suddenly gave a frightened shout.

"Hey, hey, chaps—coffin's not here!"

The disorder that ensued was human but deplorable. Each reproached the other for this awful carelessness. Harassed abuse was exchanged; Ebenezer again struck Rowland. The parson slammed the door of the keeper's cottage and disappeared. After a while someone attempted a reasonable discussion. Where had the coffin been left? In which pub back yard, by what hedge, under what tree? But no one seemed certain.

Light snow was still falling; the heavens frowned. It was dinner-time and there was no food and no money. Home was four miles away through the snow. And somewhere, lonely and snow-covered, the coffin of poor Ianto lay abandoned. Depression crept across the ten mourners. Like Job, hopeless and overcome, Ellis collapsed to the bitter cold earth and lamented weepingly:

"For why is man born? There is no sense in the behaviour of things. Everything is wicked and even the bosom pals of a man have forgetfulness in their hearts."

"Come now," heaved Llew Lewis, "wasting time you are down there. We got to go back and find our Ianto."

River, Flow Gently

The Malt Shovel Inn was on the river's edge, with a narrow slip of lawn between. For a month or so in the summer it was moderately popular with river enthusiasts who did not mind the slack, humid air of such a low-lying place. Three miles from Honeybridge, and the lane down to the door off the beaten track, there was not much casual bar trade. If the summer was wet, even the regulars who came for a holiday were apt to cancel their rooms; there is no place more oppressive in a rainy week than a quiet river valley, with the air hanging flaccid and turning one's very bones to jelly.

Carrie Ne[illegible], [illegible] her first year in the Malt Shovel, knew that the place was a mistake. Her gentlemen had not followed her, after all; none arranged to stay or brought their fine cars down the lane. She had to admit that the Malt had no modern comforts like the Swan at Honeybridge, where she had reigned as chambermaid for many years, but nevertheless she had hoped that she would be able to make the gentlemen feel at home.

"A *home*, that's what the Malt's going to be, and no blooming list of regulations over the bed, neither. . . . How's that boy of yours getting on in college, Mr. Mills?"

The regulars at the Swan were mostly comfortable, middle-aged regatta men, coming down for week-ends, and sometimes an annual week, to renew acquaintance with the river of their youth. They seldom brought wives with them, and in the evening they gathered in the lounge bar and talked of bygone boat races. Real gentlemen, and she was proud to do her best for them. One and all, they had shown interest in her great venture of getting married at last and taking an inn of her own, and nearly all made those promises.

"What, Carrie, you getting married! Lord, what's the Swan going to do! . . . There, there, never mind, we'll all be following you." And that season they gave her extra good tips, and when they left she offered them her cheek, shedding a tear, which they

nipped in their friendly way, nice and proper gentlemen that they were.

She missed them, she mourned them. There was Mr. Clarke, for instance, whose purplish-red face so worried her. Every night, after a day in his boat, he would get under the influence and rely on her not only to put him to bed but to haul him out in the morning. He would never get up unless she threw back the sheets off his curled body, give him a resounding smack, and bawl:

"Hoy! Now then, ten o'clock. Where d'you think you are? Come on, I got my work to do here."

But God help any newcomer—the old regulars knew better—who mistook her friendliness and tried any hanky-panky with her. There was that old rip Mr. M. who one morning had made this mistake. She had given him a biff in the stomach and then soundly lectured him. Even her starched apron (she was famous for her stiff and always snowy aprons) crackled in wrath. He was in the tea trade and when she got married sent her a small chest of best Orange Tips.

Eighteen years she had been in the Swan, going as a kitchen girl in plaits and in the end all but running the whole place. She had saved money, but not enough to buy a hotel on her own. And with thirty-five not far off she had felt that if she was to do anything ambitious she'd better be hurrying. Then George Neap had turned up.

She had known him before, up on the downs where they were both reared. Since then he had been in the Navy, but had come back to his old job in his father's wheelwright shed up at Wipberry. After seeing her one Saturday night in the Swan taproom, where she had gone to help for an hour, he got courting her. He was a lean, brown-skinned man with not much to say for himself. She had seen with approval that though he could put away a tidy amount of beer—she herself rarely touched anything—he knew when to stop. There seemed a certain dogged austerity about him. Also an obstinacy in his blue thin eyes. When she had asked him what he intended doing with his life, he said concisely:

"Take a pub. The old man'll let me have some dough. Got any?"

"Close on two hundred pounds," she said openly.

"They're skinning you in the Swan. A woman like you ought to have her own place."

She had told him that the Malt Shovel, down the river, was in the market. He went off alone one evening and had a sniff round there. It was autumn, the air was stagnant, the willow leaves lay thick on the misty water. The report he brought back was not enthusiastic.

"Bar empty and fly dirt on everything. Smelled as if nobody's been there for a drink for weeks. It's ramshackle."

"'Course it is," she had said. "Look who's got the place! A couple of drunkards. They've let it go down. That's why it's so cheap."

He had frowned. She pointed out, with the energy which got drowsy City gentlemen out of their beds and cleaned their rooms while they were putting on a shirt, that what the Malt Shovel needed was herself. She knew it had a regular clientèle of young boarders in July and August; not much class, like the Swan, but this she would soon change. She told George about her faithful gentlemen, whose socks she darned.

George had been obstinate for a while. She bridled, she withheld herself, she bristled. And because, in his spare, unvocal way, he was in love with her and they were not yet married, he had given in at last, though sulkily. His father gave him fifty pounds and lent him two hundred; they got the Malt Shovel, partly furnished and with two punts, a rowing boat and a canoe, for three hundred and fifty, and they spent another hundred in preening the place up. Carrie, at first, had worked like a demon; George more carefully, in his silent fashion, carpentering and repairing.

But what neither had bargained for was the air of the place. A river valley is various as a woman. At Honeybridge the valley opened out, and the air, though never so vigorous as on the downs, kept on the move; on draughty days it fair waltzed round the girdle of hills. But down by the Malt Shovel it seemed never anything but stagnant. In high summer it was like living in a conservatory of tropical plants: sapping and insidious air that took the stiffening out of your spine.

"Air here," George had remarked at first, "got no guts in it. We're too much in the lee." He was sweating, making a new bench in the taproom.

"Oh," she panted—she was distempering the walls and secure in her energy then—"we'll get used to it. We're not a couple of old crocks."

Even in winter the sheltered air was mild, and the pink roses bordering the narrow lawn flowered into December. In summer all growing things flourished with lush abundance, especially willow herb, which had to be curbed every day. Nature, if allowed, seemed bent on choking the Malt Shovel with creepers, gigantic fronds, and leaping bushes. And fat muscular toads jumped and big lusty spiders wove massive webs in the dank alley behind the house, under the bank's slope.

Wasps, too, found the place a companionable headquarters for a river holiday; that first summer they were a cruel scourge and zoomed about the inn with a derisive energy. Their holes could not be found in the wild tangle of weeds, briars, and willows beyond George's vegetable patches. One day Carrie saw a very thick grass snake languidly pulling its length into this hot little jungle, and she uttered a rare old scream that went back to her primitive ancestors. George came out of the taproom, wiping his mouth. Still bellowing, she was plunging regardless over his young carrot bed.

"Take care of them carrots," he bawled crossly.

"There's a big snake!" she shrieked.

"Aye," he said briefly, "I've seen him often." He went back into the taproom.

There were rats too. At evening they plopped into the river from holes in the clay just above the water, visiting each other or lithely easing their bodies in the placid river. She found one on the taproom counter one early morning, sitting up on its hind legs and licking beer off its front paws. On seeing her it did not seem unduly incommoded and took its time in whisking away. George set traps, but observed in that exasperatingly indifferent way he had developed lately: "You'll never get rid of rats in a ramshackle old place right on the river like this."

But worse than anything was the air. On some warm days Carrie felt her blood was turned to greasy dishwater. It was an effort even to go upstairs, it was a greater effort to turn out a room with that old energy which had been her pride. She would stand gazing out of the window—she had a terror of sitting down —and the river's soft prowl seemed to bear away all her strength.

And the water's soft *lap*, *lap* seemed to say: "Why bother? Move slowly. There's nothing worth getting into a rage about." A peculiar smooth tranquillity lay in the river's unhurried urge; something seductive and enticing, yet indifferent.

And the mists! The mists were worse in spring and autumn. They dampened everything and laid a thin mildew on cheese, bread, and George's boots lying under the sofa. The really bad ones hid everything outside in a world of dripping pale wool, so that it was dangerous to go out; you might step into the river. They shut off the Malt Shovel from the rest of the earth and muffled every sound. You might be hundreds of miles from other people.

One evening, when a particularly bad mist had lasted two days, imprisoning both her and George in the house, she had peered through the taproom hatch and found George mumbling to himself by the counter. She watched. He finished a pint of strong ale and went to draw himself another, spilling much of it into the zinc catch. It was plain there had been several. She pulled herself sharply out of her own torpor, went round into the bar, and said ominously:

"You putting the money for those pints into the till, are you, George Neap?"

He swivelled round in bleared astonishment. His thin eyes cocked across to her, he mumbled: "Someone's got to drink the bally stuff. I'm playing at customers, I am."

"Out of my bar with you, go on!" she screeched. And, panting, she began for the first time to use those classic phrases of marital rebuke common to most disputatious couples. None of her City gentlemen would have recognised the old Carrie in this termagant of swelling bosom and writhing brow. She reached home at last and, with a turn to the hangdog, George swayed out to the sitting-room and fell into a deep snooze on the sofa.

Carrie dropped panting to a bench. Lord, the air was thick as jam. She was soaking. And weak as a straw. It didn't do the heart any good to work herself into a rage like that. Better take something for it.

She heard George's snores. She went behind the bar and took down the bottle of brandy. Not for the first time, on the quiet.

In September of the second year, after a poor summer, Mr.

Chambers stepped off his luxurious launch, tied her up, and paid a call on his friend. He was a beaming man of prosperous port; in his smart blazer, spotless white trousers, and expensive Panama hat, this was the sort of gentleman that should have occupied the Malt Shovel lawn. Not those bits of larking chaps and giggling girls with twopennorth of manners who had cluttered up the place in August.

The river shimmering demurely behind him, Mr. Chambers entered the unswept lobby and was greeted by a swarm of flies. The sitting-room door was open on the left; he glanced inside and saw a cat with four kittens on a dirty cushion in the sagging sofa, a smudged calendar askew on the wall, a flyblown mirror over the mantelpiece, and a biscuit crushed on the dirty linoleum. There was a stagnant odour.

"Carrie!" he called in his old jovial way. "Carrie, ooh, ooh!" Someone tramped downstairs. A woman in a soiled dress over which was a grimy unstarched apron. Her hair was slack and her face pouchy. But undoubtedly, on a second look, Carrie. Her dulled brown eyes peered at Mr. Chambers for a puzzled moment. Then she went right over to him and, with a little whimper of pleasure, held up her cheek for his nip.

"Well, Carrie, my dear, this is a treat." And not a flicker of astonishment had he betrayed. He gallantly brushed her cheek, as of old. "I was taking a jaunt down-river today, for a change," he purred, "and thought I'd look you up." He tweaked her ear and sailed behind her into the empty bar, laying his glistening Panama on a table where unwashed beer rings entranced numerous flies.

But Carrie had become oddly shy. She stood almost furtively behind the bar, looking at him and not looking. She asked something about the Swan; she listened to his reply with a little expression of dulled eagerness.

"And now, Carrie, what are you having? . . . Ah, don't say you're still teetotal! Not with a place of your own. Look here, it won't do." She finally agreed to take a brandy. He tilted the bottle for her, laid a pound note on the counter, and beamed: "There, there, buy yourself a box of those chocolates you used to like. I didn't have time to get one." His boyish eyes shone on her roguishly.

"It's been a bad season," she said morosely. "A tyke of a season."

Mr. Chambers was not a man who allowed dismal thoughts around him. In his City office he continually preached the business value of a cheerful countenance. So he did not realise that Carrie would have been vastly comforted if he had shed a mourning tear with her over the Malt Shovel's failure. All the comfort he offered, taking out a long gold cigarette-case, was: "Ah, the Swan is not at all the same without you, Carrie."

She quivered. Though her brown eyes were still shy of looking at him directly, something seemed to stir in their torpid depths. She glanced round furtively at the slovenly bar; quietly she moved an unwashed tumbler out of sight. But of course she did not remind him of the gentlemen's promise to come and stay in the Malt Shovel. And not until he had gone, waving his Panama at her from the elegant launch, did she quiver into life.

She had stood on the lawn in the flaccid air out of which all vitality was wrung; she had uttered that little whimper as Mr. Chambers swayed away. Then she bounced in search of George. He was behind the boat-house, lazily planing a piece of wood. A man with a piece of wood is often completely happy and content with his world. So perhaps it was not the best moment for Carrie to announce aggressively: "George, we've got to give up and clear out. It's no good. I've made up my mind."

"Well, I haven't, see!" Unshaven and collarless, he went on planing the wood.

"No," she said bitterly; "while there's a drop of drink left in the stock you'll cling on like a leech. But," she prophesied direly, "it won't last, George Neap. *What about the bills?* You're going to wait till you're chucked out? . . . Bankruptcy," she hissed. "Summonses."

"You wanted the place," he said briefly. "And now we're in, I'm staying till we've got to go—and if." They had made a few pounds on the summer visitors.

It was a revenge for overruling his pre-marriage objections to the Malt. The air had worked in him like a slow poison, making him foolish and petty. She became very angry and assailed him with blistering words; he went on planing the wood. She threatened to leave him, and knew she'd never do that—not Carrie Neap, whose name had never been touched with scandal. But at this threat he looked up, and there was that bit of fright in his

eyes. There were times even now when they cooed together in loving recognition. She noticed his fright.

"Yes, I'll leave you!" she shouted.

Maddeningly he bent again to the wood. "Well, clear off, then," he said shrewdly.

She flounced away, feeling defeated. She found herself behind the taproom bar, her hand lifted to the brandy bottle. She stopped herself just in time. *No*, not another drop. Instead, fuming and bridling, she scrubbed the tables, though after a few minutes she had to stop. The air made her gasp; sweat streamed down her cheeks.

During the next week or two she tried to battle against the languor of the autumn days. The air was even more enervating than usual. The river seemed dreamily without urge, only the first fallen leaves indicating it was prowling silently onwards, peaceful and enticing. She would pull herself away from contemplation of it and, working herself into rage, attack George. He bore with her in a kind of pondering sloth. A worse effect was that he skulked oftener to the bar and, if allowed to remain there, sank into a gross lethargy and childishly agreed to everything she said, except her wish to abandon the Malt.

One evening, when he was like that and her fury recoiled on her, she suddenly lowered her voice and whispered with awful distinctness: "The river . . . the river . . . I'll drown myself." She swayed in grief; she gazed out at the dusky water with its gentle flow of red and yellow leaves.

"We'll both drown ourselves, Carrie girl," he hiccuped. Yet that fright flickered into his face again.

"There's nothing to live for," she whimpered. Their money gone, debts, and heaven knew what the future held. Not a customer in the bar for four days. No company. The winter coming. Not even a boat passing on the river.

Then the autumn mists began. She hated these above everything; they drove her frantic. Creeping and ghostly, they thickened towards evening, and in her hysteria she swore she could hear them prowling outside, like soft-padded animals. Yet if she plunged out there was nothing but a blind white silence, a world of dead. And the mists passed through the walls like ghosts, and after dark, as if seeking company, clotted and writhed in yellow murkiness in any lit room.

George couldn't go out to his jobs in the garden. The only outside noise she heard was the unearthly whirr and beat of the swans in flight, cleaving the mists with their great shuddering wings and swordlike necks. She thought of the black poisonous viciousness of their eyes and felt a sudden intimacy with these cold, savage creatures. . . . And all day there she was imprisoned with George, watching each other—he furtively waiting an opportunity to skulk into the taproom, she neglecting her work to keep a sultry eye on him, at the same time fighting that soaking inertia in the air; and through it all feeling the soft strength of the river, oh, so softly flowing past the willow herb's withering purples, the loosetrife, the grey reeds.

One of those first autumnal mists lasted for three days. At about eight o'clock on the third night she missed George and found him in the taproom rapidly finishing a glass of whisky.

"Whisky now, is it!" she panted.

"A double." He nodded. "Put it down on the slate."

She burst like a rocket. The concentrated trials of the past three days exploded in her shrieking voice, combined with all the terror of the Malt Shovel's failure. Amid extreme abuse she accused him of lacking all that which made a man a man. He was a slothful tapeworm with no right to existence.

"Here," he stuttered, "lay off." But he had gone white. There seemed a madness in the air.

Her voice rose in frenzy. A hank of hair writhed down her neck, her cheekbones leaped up and down. "I'm sick to death of you! I've had enough of it all. My life isn't worth living. I've married a dud and I've taken a dud house!" Then, with a strange and awful cry, she ran out. He heard that cry out in the mist. It rose to a wild shriek, followed by a heavy splash.

"Carrie!" he bellowed, and leaped over the counter.

It was no good; he had to give up. The mist had beaten him from the first, when he had dived in. He had heard a choked cry yards ahead down-river, but when he got there nothing was to be seen or heard. Nothing but the smooth mingling of mist and water. She could swim, but if she intended committing suicide. . . . Calling, he had thrashed about under the devilish mist until he was icy cold. He couldn't find the bank—and then it was the opposite side. But from there, on the towpath, he had

stumbled a mile to the lock-keeper's cottage, still calling her name.

They had given him a change of clothes and hot rum; they had telephoned the Honeybridge police station. But what was to be done? In his terror George had spilled out everything, and it was plain that poor Carrie had meant to end her life. There had been outside talk already of the disputes in the unlucky Malt Shovel.

"But if she could swim," the lock-keeper suddenly said, "she might be back by now. . . . They get a change of mind sometimes, once they're in the water——"

They had decided to row back. That mile up-river was extreme agony for George. He kept calling her name through the mist. When they found the Malt Shovel bank at last, he leaped out and sped blindly into the house. He sobbed her name in the lobby; distraught, he stumbled through the rooms.

Silence. The house was dark, silent, and empty. The following hour, after the lock-keeper's departure, his thoughts were scarcely coherent. A policeman arrived on a bike and questioned him. Was it fancy that there was a suspicious note in his voice? George trembled anew. But nothing could be done till the mist cleared and the body was found.

Left alone to face the night, he went to the whisky. His nerve couldn't stand any more. Huddled on a bench in a corner of the taproom, he put the bottle to his mouth and drank neat. He dared not think of the dreadful morrow. The lamp shed a dim light through the mist. It had penetrated and thickened with the night, and outside the silence was like the end of the world. He peered about him. Pale shadows curled and rose from corners, wraiths of the mist. The bar was swaying. He had a fancy that the river had risen and was gently swallowing up the house.

"Ah, Carrie girl," he whimpered, huddling farther into his corner. Swathed in mist, she stood looking at him with dreadful eyes of accusation. Was that sound the *drip, drip* of ghostly water running from her clothes? Had her soul risen already from the river bed to come and look at him in awful judgment! A spectral shawl draped the ghost in biblical fashion.

"Carrie girl," he sobbed, "I'll come with you. Wait for me." To get up courage for the act, he lifted the bottle yet again.

But the wraith advanced and he stared in awful fear, the bottle

poised. A white arm came out, pointing as if to eternity. "George Neap," a voice ordered, "stop!"

"Carrie!" he whimpered.

"Yes, Mr. Chambers," she said, heaving the mattress over, "it took some doing. But I had come to the end of my patience. 'Course the water was cold, but I was out of it in a nick and hid behind the boat-house till he had gone off to the lock-keeper's. Then I ran indoors and got myself warm till he came back. I went under a bed while he ran about calling. 'Course I took a risk, but I was determined to budge him before another winter set in."

Mr. Chambers beamed. "Well, the Swan's a brighter place with you back, my dear. . . . But some men, you know, would have got mad at your playing a trick like that; they d have turned more obstinate."

"Oh," she said, shaking his pillow out of the window, "he doesn't know it was a trick. He thought I just changed my mind when I began choking in the water. And I said I was in bed all the time, fast asleep from hot rum, when he ran about the house so demented, calling my name in the dark and mist. . . . And mind," she frowned, "you don't tell him when he serves you in the bar. Now off with you. I've got ten rooms to do, and you can't hang about like this."

Her tips from her regular gentlemen that week-end alone were more than a month's profit in the Malt Shovel. And down in the Swan bar George earned three pounds a week. But it wasn't so much the money. She valued the homage and tweakings of her gentlemen far more. They made her feel a woman full of use and standing, and she liked company. Nothing would ever take the starch out of her apron again.

The Journey

I HAD GOT ON THE TRAIN at Ventimiglia and to Cannes I was alone in the compartment; few people seemed to favour this train to Paris. I felt depressed at the thought of the seventeen hours' journey alone: an empty train for a long journey is as melancholy

as an empty theatre, and though, alone, I would be able to rest stretched along the seat, it was preferable to have one or two persons—even if only to look at, or to hate, to sneer at, or derive, perhaps, a secret amusement.

A woman entered my compartment at Cannes. I glanced at her, a little disappointed. She was a middle-aged Frenchwoman loaded with small parcels and a hatbox; a wispy porter followed her, borne down with two large suitcases. Dropping her parcels everywhere, she sat in turn on the three corner seats at her disposal and finally selected the one opposite to me, but kept another one reserved by depositing a coat on it. "Someone will join her at Marseilles," I thought, "she is keeping a seat for a friend." But smiling at me brilliantly and displaying a short row of perfectly matched but false teeth she opened conversation by saying it was pleasant to change seats on a long journey and also one didn't want the compartment full.

In my stilted and careful French I politely agreed. Her black, black eyes looked at me with that shrewd, quick glance of the alert Frenchwoman and, after a few tentative observations, she put her head on one side and asked if Monsieur had liked the Riviera.

We drew out of Cannes. The train was cutting along the narrow, brown-yellow *plage*. It was afternoon and early spring. The air was thick and warm with yellow sunlight, so yellow you felt it was silk on which you could wipe your hands. And there was the blue sea, with its slow, lazy curls of little waves like white ostrich feathers as they fell on the sand. The other side of the train, the gardens of the villas and the near hillside were foamy with almond-blossom and mimosa and, beyond, the rocky hills of the island valleys were cool in their blue-grey silence. Northwards, it would be cold and wet and the trees would still be shriven; still it would be winter, a few hours hence.

I told her I admired the Riviera, in spite of its eczema of villas and its ridiculous millionaire hotels, palaces and casinos. She differed from me in her tastes, I gathered, as, adroitly smiling her small, glittering smile, she chattered in a pleasant and lively manner. She liked the smart hotels and the fashionable towns of the Côte d'Azur. It had been a change for her. Apparently she lived a suburban family life outside Paris and had been enjoying a three weeks' holiday with her sister, who kept a *pension*

in Cannes. I had been dawdling along the coast into Italy, living in villages, for five months. She sat smiling at me and listened attentively when I spoke, nodding her head, now sagaciously, now with an agreeable vivacity, in the politely self-assured manner of French women. She seemed very alive and of happy but mature temperament.

"I like gaiety when I am on holiday," she told me. "In Paris I work at my home like thousands of other women. Here I have been among the select and the fashionable of the world." She sighed, with an excessive melancholy. "Tomorrow I will be back in my home."

She had wanted to be gay, I could see, she had wanted romance. Perhaps the Riviera had given it to her. Her face for three or four moments had become pensive and sad. She was middle-aged and married. But she was charming. I liked her, aloofly. I could have exchanged jokes with her, a discreet train flirtation. Her highly-decorated face amused me, but I gave her credit, too, for taste and artistry. Her red was not too red, her eye-black thin and delicate, and her cream-pinkish skin was smooth as vellum, freshly powdered. Such mastery of cosmetics I had not seen for some time. My glance rendered her homage, which she received accurately and graciously. Again she smiled. "Monsieur's French is very good indeed," she lied. I was almost offended at this offering and decided she was clumsy. With disarming intuition she looked at me wistfully and added, "Everyone must be encouraged in their efforts to speak French; one must not be impatient or laugh at them."

Soon, soon, we would be leaving that warmly-tinted coast. All my five months became like a single drowsy afternoon spent in lazy dreaming, and I held it in my memory as though I were carrying a sun-warmed apricot in my hand. A single afternoon of indolence and soft, warm colour. And it was past. The grey rain and the windy streets of the north awaited me. Between the palms and over the red rocks of Théoule the sea spread like soft blue velvet dropped from the shoulders of goddesses who had gone up into the hills to bathe in the sunlight. I had seen beautiful women in the villages: they had been mellowed by the sun and they moved slowly and gracefully, as though they had a contented stillness within them. And the train was rushing away with gathering speed, towards the city.

Sighing, I looked away from the window. Madame, opposite to me, was still gazing out. Her face had become sober. She too, I thought, she too is protesting that there are such things as duty and work, cities with all their horrors of factories and giant cliffs of stone where people creep or hurry like insects. Age broke through the careful cosmetics of her face. Perhaps she had been enjoying a romantic episode on this southern coast, perhaps nothing had happened to her, perhaps she disliked her husband in Paris. Now she was returning with a sad acceptance in her dreaming heart.

Knowing my gaze, she turned and looked at me, a prepared expression of faintly wistful interest in her face. I suppose she had heard my sigh.

"Monsieur has regrets at leaving the Côte d'Azur," she suggested with a hesitating smile. Assuring her I had many, she added, "Ah, but you are young, very young yet, and perhaps you can return many, many times. This, I think, will be my last visit." She looked at me with her bright black eyes, that had contradictions of temperament in them, and I could see that she decided I was young enough for her to feel nothing but a maternal interest in me. "I cannot come here very often. But *you* have everything before you."

In a little while she had extracted from me a few personal details, and from her I learned that she had two young sons who were going to cost a great deal to educate: that was why she would never be able to afford a Riviera holiday again. She said not a word about her husband; perhaps he was dead. Her face, I decided, had a jaunty bravery in it. She wanted to keep young, gleaming, alert—and I admired the pretty art of her face with a renewed approval.

We swept into Marseilles. Now, I thought, we shall be invaded by passengers and we shall have a full compartment for the remaining thirteen hours' journey to Paris. But again few favoured that train. A man of forty or so put his head inside our door and, after glancing at Madame and then at me, took possession of the corner seat on her side. Since Madame did not remove her coat from the remaining corner seat, it was not taken, though never once did she use it herself, in spite of her statement that she liked to change seats on a long journey.

The newcomer, I judged, was a commercial traveller. He

carried with him a business-like portfolio, and he was respectably dressed, neat and subdued, except for a glittering tie-pin in his spotted puce cravat. He had the half-weary, half-efficient face of the French business-man, and it was thinnish and pallid. He was like ten thousand other men, hard-working in routine and commercial honesty. His thin hands in their movements were decisive and crisp. But he looked bloodless.

Madame, I saw, examined him too. I felt that he met with her favour, as far as one's judgments are affected by fellow passengers on a long train journey. It was not long before they were talking. He had examined her in return, and when she wanted to make sure that there was a dining-car on the train, he was able to inform her definitely. From that they proceeded in a quick, bitten kind of French that tested my knowledge severely.

Evening was approaching and the sky was lilac-coloured over the glimpses of sea one saw beyond Marseilles, the last glimpses. But there was still the Provençal countryside to look at, the tidy vineyards, and the silver-green olive groves, the tiny crouched collections of rust-brown and rose-plastered cottages perched here and there on hilltop or in hollow. It would be dark when the formal, uneventful landscapes of the Rhône began. After dinner perhaps my two fellow passengers would cease their lively talking and I might sleep. It was a curse that one could not afford a *wagon-lit*—and doubtless every chink of ventilation would be closed by my typical fellow passengers. Their chattering French began to annoy me.

Madame looked at me once or twice again and nodded her head as though in recognition or greeting. But I was really ousted from her interest, I could see. She had her own kind and her own age to talk to now. And the commercial traveller had no use for me at all.

Madame had come to occupy his full attention. He paid her, with gesture, glance and the occasional words I picked up, polite flattery; once he leant to her and patted her arm with a gentle reverence. They passed, I gathered, from a discussion of the Paris shops to the prices of *appartements* in the different districts. She placed a gracious intensity into her manner. Her plumpness and her brave rouged face pleased him, I saw. And she opened her shining eyes, that seemed so passionately dark, in delicious surprise at some of his statements.

Of course they dined together. I sat at an opposite table. His deference and solicitation were admirable; I could guess that he wanted her to make a good meal—the waiter returning for those who wanted second helpings, he chose for her with graceful flourishes some select piece on the outstretched platter. They did not share wine—each had a half-bottle, and she, I saw, with that watching forgivable on a weary train journey, paid her own bill. He gave her cigarettes with her coffee and chatted with renewed fervour. Madame, who had taken a very good meal, was a little more subdued. Her rouge had become flaming.

They left the dining-car before me and I thoughtfully lingered over my cognac. We had passed Avignon: the train was rushing into a soft blue night. The shadows over the dim meadows were beautiful to watch, and the trees flying past were mysterious in the gowns of pale evening mist that still clung to them. I ordered another cognac and hoped I would sleep when the gloom of night had fully come. Surely Madame and the commercial traveller would exhaust conversation soon.

I was mistaken. They talked until midnight. He sat closer to her now. Madame was a little less animated than she had been in the early evening, but the arch coyness of her manner was still manifest and she still gazed at the commercial traveller with her sultry dark eyes. "She is having a last little fling," I thought, "before she returns to her strict home in the suburbs." Her pleasure in being able to interest this man to veiled love-making was obvious. She had not yet grown too *passée*.

When at last she decided to rest, he became beautifully anxious for her comfort. He shook out the pillow she had hired, he saw no draught caught her and, with reverential and soothing touch, he took possession of the carpet slippers she had taken out of her bag and, after she had removed her shoes, held them out, in one in each hand, to her small and rather shapely feet. She thanked him prettily and then he lifted her feet and placed them gently on the seat, so that she curled up, a little plumply but attractively, to settle herself for the night. He loved achieving these little attentions, he gave a little shake of delight like a terrier, and smiled again at her . . . and patted her ankle. Then, after demanding if I were agreeable, he switched off the white light and turned on the dim blue. There were nine more hours until we reached Paris.

I slept intermittently in that train crashing and swaying through a night, but the mournful noises of the journey penetrated those snatches of slumber. The grind of wheels, the hiss of steam, the sound of the torn air, mingled with the fragmentary dreams that came to me. Drowsily I saw that journey as a crossing between the extreme periods of life. The fresh gaily-tinted charm of the south was passed and already the train had entered the bare cold regions where it was winter. I hated it that I was being rushed on in this night. Sometimes I rubbed my eyes and peered out of the window, but the darkness was vast and impenetrable. Madame, opposite me, dozed with her head fallen on her chest, and the commercial traveller seemed to be sleeping with ease and comfort, his pale face lapsed into the immobility of a man calmly dead.

Twice, almost overcome by the stuffiness of the compartment, I stumbled out into the deserted corridor and, in a stupor, walked and and down. How the train swayed as it screeched and ground its way through the thick darkness! It seemed to have a downward plunge and writhing steam hissed up from beneath the coaches and shrouded the windows. It was as though we were crashing into an inferno.

Again I slept. When I fully awoke it was late morning. In an hour we would be in Paris. I felt dirty and dazed and went to wash myself. Madame and the commercial traveller were both awake—she sat hunched in her corner, with averted face gazing out of the window, and he, I think, was waiting for her to turn to him again.

I had a scrappy wash and returned to the compartment: there was no breakfast to be obtained on that train. The atmosphere of the compartment, I sensed, had become forlorn and, in spite of the stuffiness, cold. Cold. Madame still sat averted and hunched, her face hidden from us. Through the dirtied windows one could dimly see the wintry countryside, the shriven trees, the wet grey fields, and a grey, hostile sky. I did not want to look out too long.

What was wrong with Madame, why did she crouch there hiding herself, unmoving, in an untidy lump? I could see part of her face, since I was opposite to her. Her charming colour seemed gone. Why did she not go out and freshen herself, apply more cosmetic? Huddled and still, she continued to stare out of the window, the collar of her coat turned up. The commercial

traveller still waited in his corner, quiet but watchful, his brown eyes a little hurt.

Only once did she stir for a few moments out of that dazed stillness—and that was when the commercial traveller left the compartment for a while. She merely shook herself a little, turned, looked at me for a moment, and then moved back to her huddled and averted staring out of the window. And when she looked at me, in a single blind glance, colourless, I almost averted my face too.

She was changed almost out of recognition. Not so much because of the colouring that had disappeared in the night, but because of the almost saturnine despair in her face. She, who had been so gay and lively. I went out to the corridor. Perhaps she wanted to be left quite alone for a few minutes.

But she had done nothing to revive her former appearance when I returned to the compartment a little while after the commercial traveller. She still sat in her almost sinister brooding at the window. And he still waited for her to turn to him, looking hurt and pathetic and at a loss. The grey light of the morning made the skin of his face into a kind of oyster-grey, too. But he awaited her pleasure watchfully, his arms folded, his hair watered and plastered down freshly.

Paris at last. A light brownish fog hung over the suburbs. How disconsolate and weary those suburbs looked, shrinking under the dirty brown shawls of fog. And I thought of the fluttering naked pink almond-blossom in the warm spring breeze of the south, and the yellow air that was like silk. Cities, cities, why were they necessary?

I was afraid to look across openly at Madame. I knew her sorrow and her despair. But I wanted to render her some service, or I should have liked to have seen her smile a little. And I was sad now that the journey was passed. To the last she ignored the commercial traveller, and I was glad that I managed to forestall him in lifting down her bags from the rack. Not once did she turn her face to him as the train drew into the Gare de Lyon and we prepared to part. He began to look indignant, those last few moments. When the train stopped in the station he hesitated, to give her another opportunity, and then, flashing me a sulky glance, hurried away disappointed.

I did not care to intrude on the privacy she obviously desired,

so I allowed her to wait until a porter would come to help her with her bags. I saw her once more, on the platform, a porter hurrying after her with her two heavy suitcases. She passed quite near to me. Her face was heavy and resentful, but shut in a kind of blind determination. She hurried on quickly. It seemed as though she had some bitter duty she was determined at all costs to perform. But I was glad to see that her despair had given place to this strength of motive, sullen as it seemed. And I wondered at her destination.

Outside the station, the morning air smelt of the near-by fog. The sky was a waste of grey ice. It was very cold. I would go to bed for a comfortable sleep when I reached the hotel. Then it would be evening, and the warm lights would shine out, white in the streets, but in my favourite café, among the tarnished mirrors, the cupids, the faded plush and the tinted glasses, yellow.

The Bard

I

WHEN GWYN BROUGHT HOME ANOTHER PRIZE CHAIR from the Eisteddfod, his wife Bronwen could no longer restrain herself. She eyed the massive oak object with a mixture of enmity and despair.

"Where can it go?" she demanded. "There is one of these chairs in all our rooms, with three in the parlour. This is more than a joke." Their cottage was very small and poky.

Gwyn had placed it on the mat before the fire and was now walking round and round the tall angular Prize with a justifiable look of self-congratulation and esteem.

"Fifty bards tried for it," he said.

"It's not," continued Bronwen callously, "as though we ever sat in them. They have no more comfort than sitting in a soapbox."

Gwyn ran his finger appraisingly along the highly varnished wood.

"It is a chair," he cried raptly, "fit for a coronation."

"Sometimes," Bronwen said, a dark glinting look in her eye,

"when we are short of firewood I am tempted to chop up a chair or two." She lifted the gaunt scrag-end of mutton from the saucepan on the fire and pushed it with contempt on the supper table. "A pity," she added disagreeably, "they don't let you have the value of a chair in money, instead."

Gwyn pulled his wild auburn hair with the authentic poet's rage. His face, that had been flaccid with gratification, contracted in wrath.

"You chop up one of my chairs," he cried, "and I'll . . . I'll chop *you* up."

She was unimpressed. "There's your supper," she snapped. "Not much of a banquet is it, true enough, for a bard that's brought home the chair."

Gwyn's face had passed from divinely flaming anger to a sombre sulkiness. But he moaned:

"Banquets! Who wants banquets? You talk vulgarly, Bronwen. I am content with simple food. Bread and a bit of Caerphilly cheese. Greater men than I have fed on less."

"And many more," she said aggravatingly, "have had poultry, green peas, and champagne."

"Such food and drink," he answered, becoming dignified in turn, "are also my ambition."

"Well, well," said Bronwen comfortably, with an air of giving way to him, "you are young yet, and if you go on winning chairs you'll be able to open a nice big shop for selling them."

He clutched his ears.

"Stop now, stop now," he groaned. "You shall have the last word."

"I dare say I will," she said, undiminished.

During supper—for he was a creature of swiftly changing moods—Gwyn became vivacious.

"You ought to have been there to see me chaired, Bronwen," he chirruped. "There was a crowd; the chapel was packed. When the sword was sheathed over my head and they all shouted 'Peace' my pleasure would have been a thousand times greater if you had been present. Dan Evans said, 'Where is your wife? A proud moment this should be for her'."

Bronwen, steadily cutting slices of bread and butter for him, said, "I've seen it often enough. It's boring after a while. And I had jobs to do in the house."

"Baba Price came up to me," goods fromd happily, "and said, 'Let me recite some of your poem lost becat concert, Gwyn'."

"Did she!" Bronwen said. And adwas carefully, 'What was she wearing? Something new and grand, I expect."

He waved his fork impatiently in the air. I didn't look," he protested. "I don't look to see what women are wearing."

"No, indeed," she agreed, " you don't."

"She asked me," he swept on, "to take a copy of it up to her house tomorrow afternoon. She'll recite it for me first to see if I approve."

"So very likely you won't be home to tea," Bronwen remarked.

"Nothing was said about tea."

"Oh yes," Bronwen said coolly, "you'll have tea together all right. And pretty little cakes and watercress and chocolates. You stay to tea and enjoy yourself for once."

He made an arch and tittering sound through his teeth.

"You are narrow-minded, Bronwen. Out in the world no one takes notice of such things."

But Bronwen said grimly, "I know Baba Price. She gets her funny little thrills in funny little ways."

"Ho, ho," chortled Gwyn, pleased, "jealous are you?" He smacked his chest in a virile manner. "Well now, every poet has his fancy woman."

"You encourage that woman," Bronwen declared with sudden high temper, "and it'll be the worse for you. I'll have no scandal."

"Baba Price is a lady," he began to thunder bardically. "A lady of good substantial stock and position."

"She is a crank," said Bronwen contemptuously.

"You have no tact or taste!" And once more his hands ravaged the wealth of his hair.

"I wonder why you married me," she said with a faint sneer.

"Indeed!" he groaned.

Her little inheritance of five hundred pounds had been spent long ago. Now there was never enough food in the house. She had no clothes that could be called clothes (Gwyn had pronounced, "Your apparel is decent and respectable"): and now she never went to the cinema or concerts or even chapel. It was all very well for Gwyn to come home with a chair and crowned with bardic glory. Poems were very nice in their place, but they neither fed nor clothed. Well she knew it.

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He had always been a little queer. Never able to master a job properly. In the old, old days he would have been a minstrel and a teller of tales, wandering from village to village over the countryside and earning his meals and a bed by recitals in cottage and farm. Those men are no more, but the spring of song still flows in their modern descendants—torrentially, as a rule, undiminished by the discouragement of a busier age. The Eisteddfod is the only arena where they are welcomed, and there they disport themselves with a few remnants of their former glee: colliers, farm-labourers, butchers, ministers of the gospel, insurance agents, each with a thick wad of manuscript, fruit of spare hours after the ordinary day's work is respectably achieved.

But Gwyn lusted after a full-time glory. He wanted to sing all day long. As a youth, his father and mother forced him into, in turn, office, shop, pit, farm, religious revival, council work on the road, house-building, and the manufacture of mineral waters. But if it wasn't the sack, he would lie in bed one Monday morning and declare he would go into decline if he persisted at the particular job. And indeed he was a half-wit at all mundane labour. True, when he married Bronwen, at twenty-five, he had been in a job for six months, reading gas-meters for the Council, but a month or two after the wedding he was dismissed because of a series of incorrect readings—really due to his mental absorption in a long saga on Tristan and Isolde, portions of which he would declaim in those friendly houses he visited (though it was said that Gwyn, in his frenzies of poetic generosity, deliberately misread the gas-meters if asked to recite). But he never allowed himself to be overcome with pessimism at his inability to grapple with work.

Bronwen had pleased him a great deal. Docile in her first adoration of his visionary mobile face, handsome hair and unusual conversation—for he had made love to her in a style founded on some of the luscious episodes of the Mabinogion—she ran away with him to Swansea and they married in a registry office. She had been a school-teacher. For some time, spending her five hundred pounds, they had been happy. And a few months after the loss of the gas-meter job Gwyn had found another

as haulier to a grocer, delivering goods from a cart up and down the Valley. But that too he had lost because whenever he was visited by an idea for an ode—which was frequently—he would walk off over the hills to compose it, leaving people waiting for their butter and bacon: literature came first with him.

Since the haulier job, they had existed on the meagre proceeds of a "tally-trade" Gwyn erratically worked at, securing all kinds of household goods from blankets to saucepans at a wholesale price from a firm in the North of England, and selling them for weekly payments to local wives, who were equally erratic with their shillings. But already he possessed a large trunk full of manuscript poems, and he gave Bronwen permission to roam among them at will. She still pleased him to a certain extent. He only wished she were more romantic. He would like to see her arrayed in a long robe of yellow velvet, a chaplet of leaves and flowers on her hair. But, as he had often told himself, he kept his good-humour. Life was chock-full of stuff for poetry. Who could dare to be unhappy and idle amid such plenty!

His Welsh poems were long and enormous with mystic exaltations, fanciful pictures of bygone ages, stormy combats between the powers of good and evil, taking place amid strange landscapes that bore no resemblance to anything known to the five senses. Their very size and heroic squandering of words made eisteddfod adjudicators blench with a kind of respectful fear. Bronwen complained bitterly at his refusal to write on both sides of his manuscript paper, declaring she would be able to buy a "proper joint" for Sundays if only he would oblige; but he refused, firmly and indignantly.

Since the age did not favour volumes of poetry in the Welsh language, he depended on eisteddfodau for the human homage due—and indeed necessary—to a poet. Throughout Wales not many of these annual festivals lacked a contribution from Gwyn. He had not yet been successful at the great National Meeting, though he knew he would achieve that grandeur in the near future. Meanwhile he had gained eight bardic chairs in the minor festivals: fine pieces of varnished oak strongly nailed together and substantial enough to hold the stoutest person. Anyone would be proud of the chairs.

Except, of course, Bronwen. Bronwen seemed to have gone a little sour of late. Occasionally he devoted a minute or two of

heavy thought to her. But even those minutes gave him a few lines to insert in his latest epic. "Women," his mind chanted dolorously, "oh ye daughters of the fallen Eve, women haunt my senses in sinful (or *sick?*) meditations." *Sick* would be the safer word he decided. And Bronwen would not be likely to apply the words to herself, even if she ever read the poem. Sweet Bronwen! A good girl she was. Would never let him down. Well, well, it was only natural that a girl should pout sometimes. They did not have the busy interests that a man possessed.

III

The next day, after the midday meal, he went up to Baba Price's house, a copy of the poem under his arm. He slipped out of the house quietly, without telling Bronwen that he was going. But she heard him from the kitchen and splashed her hands angrily into the washing-up water. Wasting his time with that ludicrous old woman.

Baba Price was a well-to-do woman who fussed at various functions in the Valley. She particularly liked being chosen as the judge of literature in an eisteddfod, and she herself wrote what she called "Visions"—lofty and very short prose-pieces which were, apparently, variations on a spiritual theme. She wore highly-decorated gowns, tightly-fitting but usually with triangles of lace here and there from which beads and objects hung very brightly: when she walked she tinkled, though not unmelodiously. To be invited to tea at her house was considered a compliment. Miss Price had also at various times put musical young men of the district on the road to success: some of them had sung in concerts at Cardiff and Swansea. Bronwen disliked her and thought her unreal. *False*, she thought again, clattering the plates in the greasy water.

Gwyn wasting his time up in her house! She'd bet anything he would stay to tea. Why couldn't Baba Price invite them both one evening? Taking a man away from his work in the afternoon! Gwyn ought to be out canvassing for orders for blankets, now that winter was approaching. Oh, he was useless, useless.

A fool! That's what he was. As she said it to herself, she left the washing-up, sat on a chair, and cried. She had married a good-for-nothing fool. She cried for ten minutes. When would

he take himself in hand and live and work properly like other men? She was sick to death of it.

At half-past four she made a cup of tea. Gwyn did not return. And as the time wore on she felt herself becoming fierce. Lolling up in that house, reading poetry while Baba Price purred every now and again, "Charming, charming." Ha! And at half-past five a customer called wanting towels. Bronwen took her into the front room, that had once been the parlour and was now transformed into a kind of shop. It was very untidy.

"A couple of the two-shilling ones, Mrs. Roberts," said the customer, a slack-bodied and pallid miner's wife. "And perhaps a pair of pillow-slips I'll have too, now I've come. But I've forgot my book. Your husband knows how much I owe." She spoke wheedlingly and complainingly, as though she were not long for this world. Probably she owed Gwyn a lot already, Bronwen thought.

And the room was in such confusion. She couldn't find the beastly towels. Piles of blankets and rolls of calico and American oil-cloth and sheets and rugs, all mixed up and chucked anywhere. When at last she came to the bundle of towels lying under a table draped with cretonne, drops of perspiration were running down her nose. The customer kept on sighing and condoling.

"You are paying something?" demanded Bronwen so sharply that the customer, who had not intended such an action, handed a shilling to her.

"I'll put it down in our book," said Bronwen. Fortunately the ledger was visible. She hunted in it for the customer's name. But the ledger was not to be understood. Indeed, lines for poems played hide-and-seek with the business entries. And when she did come across a customer's name, she found a comment attached, such as, "Mrs. A. P. Adams· Her countenance is like a desert, but where her mouth is, there also is an oasis," and, "Mr. J. Evans: Honest John Evans, of such are the mighty sinews of our country." Bronwen, after searching for some time, flung the book away, in a real fury now.

Back in the living-room, she tried to subdue her anger by cleaning the cutlery. But it continued to rise in sharp and urgent waves, right to the top of her head, where it seethed like boiling pitch. A fool and a waster! They'd never have five pounds in the

bank. More likely, Gwyn would find himself in trouble, customers not paying for goods that did not belong to him. There'd be a warrant out for him one day. And they'd be sold up. She'd be cast out into the world. Why, oh why, had she let him have her five hundred pounds! The scoundrel.

Seven o'clock! Was he in that house still? Of course he was. Preening and enjoying himself, sitting back among silk cushions. They were having a glass of sherry together. Baba would play the piano. Her eyes, with their peculiar kind of glitter, were smiling at him, telling him to remain if he would like to.

At eight o'clock Bronwen swept the cutlery into a drawer and, with a pale and determined face, came to a decision. She dragged one of the high Prize chairs into the scullery and, taking a hatchet, braced herself into chopping it into firewood. It was a hard task, smiting the slabs of wood apart, but at the end of half an hour she had made a big pile of useful pieces. Firewood was really needed, and it was too late to go to the shops. Then she sat in the living-room, her knees pressed together, and did some knitting.

IV

Gwyn appeared at ten o'clock, looking very pleased with himself and the world. He seemed to have a puffed-out appearance, as though he had suddenly become stouter. Baba Price had been turning his head with flattery, it was obvious. He called to Bronwen quite jovially:

"Baba Price made me stay to supper, after all."

Bronwen's clicking knitting needles were working at an exaggerated speed.

"You've been enjoying yourself, have you?" she said.

"Yes. Talking about poetry." He flopped into a chair as if he was now a little exhausted by the experience. "A very intelligent woman," he added, sighing.

"Yes," Bronwen agreed, "she looks that."

He peeped out at her, from beneath his auburn hair, that so poetically flaunted itself.

"You been at home all the evening?" he asked.

"I have," she said, staring at the swiftly moving thread of blue wool.

Presently he rose from the chair, a little restlessly, drummed

his fingers on the table, glanced indecisively at a row of stout books, and finally went into the scullery and lit the gas-burner. She heard him brushing his teeth. He wanted to go to bed, did he! After a while he came striding quickly into the living-room.

"What's that pile of wood in the scullery?" he barked shrilly.

"One of your chairs," she said immediately. "There was no firewood left for the morning."

"You chopped up one of my chairs!" he screamed in a feminine wail.

"I told you I was going to," she said, as if the information justified the action. The blue thread of wool moved like flashes of lightning over her small hands.

"Oh, oh!" he foamed. His fingers went to his hair, he seemed about to swoon. To come back from Aspasia to these hateful matrimonial squabbles. "You . . . you wicked woman," he wailed, and banged the table.

"You don't think those chairs are a decoration to a house, do you?" she demanded. "They're depressing to look at. And there are seven more of them." She finished with a note of gloating in her voice.

He began to stride across the room. "I . . . I've a good mind to *strike* you," he cried, venom becoming active among his foam. He crossed to her and raised his arm menacingly. "You hear me. I could strike you."

"Why don't you, then!" she cried, bending her head to her knitting as if to receive the blow on her neck.

"That," he said, distending his nostrils proudly, "I will not do. Much as you deserve it."

"Ha!" she exclaimed.

He left her, drew a chair to the table, sat down and laid his head on the table among his arms.

"Why did I marry you!" he wailed. "Nothing but strife and bickering in the house. Nagging and spite. I get no peace of mind. My work is being ruined."

"What work?" she asked. "The tally-trade or the poems?"

He moaned in despair. It seemed to him very typical of her vulgar mind that she should ask that question. He hated to be reminded of the tally-business. Nevertheless he answered sweepingly:

"Everything, everything."

She laid down her knitting, stood up, and looked at him with cold and hard eyes.

"Yes," she said, "everything *is* being ruined. And the ruin is in yourself. Because you're a natural clown. Because you can't get to grips with life. Because you're lazy. Because you ought to be a kept man. Because you ought to have married such as Baba Price. And because, God help me, I won't be blind to what you are and pander to your conceit." Her mind had been working with clear rapidity over the knitting.

He had lifted his head and was looking at her with horror. It was as if he was being forced to listen to harsh iron bells ringing in a place of grey desolation, a prison with high, blank walls. Bronwen, facing him in cold judgment, was like the incarnate spirit of that place. He couldn't bear it, or the sight of her. His inside felt sick. His mouth worked.

"What . . . what was all that you said?" he demanded, in hysteria.

"You heard," she said.

Gwyn had. But her words had already gone out of him, washed away in the foaming tide of his own dramatic suffering. Only the spirit of the words remained before him, implacable and harsh. And he didn't quite know what to do about it and how best to close his eyes to that spirit. He felt like giving vent to a soliloquy, like Hamlet. But his mind seemed unable to find a suitable beginning.

"Go away from me," he cried at last, and averted his face again. "You don't understand me, you never have, and you never will."

And Bronwen was struck dumb. She stood staring at him. Her denunciation, that she had delivered out of a high sense of justification, was as naught. It meant nothing to him. She knew that he would triumph, that he would always triumph. He had for ever the shield of his belief in himself, closely buckled to his hand. He would for ever do battle for the Muse that he worshipped.

Suddenly she began to laugh. She sat in her chair again and laughed, loud and long. Tears ran down her cheeks: she dabbed them away with her little pink-frilled apron, that Gwyn had given her on her birthday, a pretty thing that she wore in the evenings. Her laughter bubbled and rippled, with now and again deeper and darker notes running in her throat. She had married a clown. And she would get her share of fun out of him.

After a while, glad that the disgusting squabble had passed, Gwyn even joined her, contributing a delighted smile. For he too had a sense of humour, peculiar to himself. And after all, he told himself, married life was bound to be a little dramatic, and even unpleasant, sometimes.

Death in the Family

WHEN ELI PRICHARD'S SON AND DAUGHTERS HEARD that their father was dying they hastened in all speed to the old home. Though, as the four of them lived in the Valley, it was only a tram-ride to Bwlch, that part of the vale where old Prichard lived—he was widower—with his one unmarried child, a woman of thirty with a hare-lip, Dilys. Prichard, an obstinate and obstreperous man, had always refused to make a will. "Next to nothing is there to leave," he insisted. The children knew there was no money. But there was the furniture. Good mahogany and oak articles, Welsh and substantial, including a fine, heavy piano: and none of the married children had been able to afford a piano as yet.

Eli Prichard lay dying. No one would have thought it of him a week ago. He looked such a hale man: spare with it though, and given to bouts of hard drinking. And it was drink that had brought him to his end. When returning home one stormy night he had slipped on a swaying unrailed bridge and fallen into the swollen river, which carried him to a shallow reach, where he lay and slept until morning. He was sixty: and all that week he swore—during his intervals of coherent consciousness—that he wouldn't die. But he sank and sank, and then on the Saturday the doctor announced he wouldn't last out the night.

All the children arrived towards evening. They came in their best clothes, for death is an important event. And they wanted to lay immediate claim to those pieces of furniture they fancied. Three daughters: Beth, Cassie and Aga, and the son, Jenkin, who was accompanied by his beak-nosed wife, Mary Jane.

They tramped up to the father's chamber first. Each was shocked at his swelled appearance and remarked at the delicate and musty plum shade that had spread over his puffed-out face.

"Hard he lived, and hard he's dying," Beth said.

"Now let bygones be bygones at his hour," Aga observed, for at every opportunity Beth would rake up the bitter family altercations.

"There's comfortable he might have been in his old age!" Beth insisted. "Now there's not a penny of his own to bury him."

"You been paying in to insurance," Aga said tartly. "That'll bury him."

"My rightful share I'll give," Beth said, who was the most prosperous of the sisters.

"He shall be buried proper," Jenkin said, "with a hearse and all." At which his wife, Mary Jane, put in her word:

"Surely enough friends he's got to carry him on a bier? Always drinking and spending pounds on that crowd in the Black Rock. A fine funeral it will be! All the drunkards in the place." She finished with a subdued but acrid titter.

For at one time there had been money in the Prichard family. Before the death of the mother. *She* had kept Prichard in the bounds of moderation—and died early with the strain of it. From then Prichard had gone his own splendid way. The mother's money had gone, and with it the savings that came from his well-paid job as a fireman in the colliery. He should have been one of the most prosperous men in the place. When his children came to expostulate with him, he sent them flying with oaths and insults.

"A pack of thieving apes, that's what I put in the world," he would shout.

Often, too, he could not abide the sight of the ugly and hare-lipped Dilys and more than once the woman had taken a job as servant elsewhere. Always to return, however, for, though simple in mind, she had a habit of stealing any odd money that was left about, with which she would buy either a canary or a quantity of boiled sweets.

They assembled downstairs. At intervals of a few minutes one of them would run up to the death-chamber to see if any change had taken place in the unconscious man. The disposal of Dilys was the first problem.

"An eye open you've been keeping, Dilys," began Cassie in a bullying voice, "for a job?"

"No," said Dilys, who seldom had anything to say. Her great

bald eyes accepted this family conclave without comment.

"Well," continued Cassie, "after the funeral, going to share out the furniture of this house we are. And no money you've got to pay the rent, have you? No? Well then, a job you must find quick. And no daft tricks and dishonesty this time, for no home will you have to skulk back to. Understand that? No home will you have." The sister raised her voice menacingly.

"Yes indeed, Dilys," put in Aga, "for no right have you to come and live on our backs."

Jenkin, the son, began to mutter something, but at the sound of his voice Mary Jane, his wife, lifted her bold angry nose and insisted on her say:

"Shame it is that she can't keep a place. A big hulking woman like Dilys! Never let her skulk back to me. No dishonest woman will I shelter behind my doors. Warn her sufficiently now."

Dilys's face remained bald.

"A place far out in the country she ought to take," said Beth, "far out. I will write to a friend in Cardigan about her. On a farm she should be put."

The other women agreed that Dilys should be sent to the depths of the country. Then any disgrace she might incur would not be known locally. The matter of Dilys thus disposed of, they began the wrangle over the furniture, crockery and kitchen utensils. The piano came first.

Beth, being the eldest, considered she had the right to first choice of all the furniture.

"Mine the piano is," she began, looking round suspiciously. "Already my little Megan has been having lessons for it."

"Indeed, indeed," put in Jenkin's wife in a silky voice, "and what room for a big piano have you got in your funny little house, then? And what about my Fannie, who has got *talent* for the piano?"

Beth flushed arrogantly and furiously. She began to shout:

"Who are you, woman, to talk! Don't *you* poke that nose of yours where it's got no business. Jenkin it is who should speak. An outsider you are."

Jenkin had always been alarmed of his big, hefty sisters. Cowed he looked, and cowed he was, sitting between them and his dominant-nosed wife. And it was she who now brought out the trump card:

"Well now, *ladies*, know you do, I suppose, that my Jenkin can make claim on *all* property, since it was the wish of your poor dead mother, who owned it."

This pronouncement caused an uproar that would have subdued a more courageous man than Jenkin. The sisters seemed to become twice their normal size as they rose and swelled in wrath. Beth actually shook her fist under Mary Jane's excitedly twitching beaked nose. Then she, Cassie and Aga turned to the agitated Jenkin.

"Threats or no threats," Mary Jane's voice shrilled above the din, "you cannot go against the wishes of your dead mother."

"Shame on you, woman, shame on you," shrieked Aga—"that you can say such a thing with our dear father dying in the house. Out with you—turn her out, sisters. Low-minded and cunning old serpent as she is. Coming here, where she got no right. Out with her." And Aga advanced to her sister-in-law with arms ready for violence.

"You lay your hand on me, Mrs. Aga Evan," hissed Mary Jane, "and a summons I'll have taken out on you this very hour."

Jenkin at last raised a despairing voice:

"Women, women, shocking this is. No robber do I want to be. Listen you to me now. An idea I have. Lots we will draw. Out of my old hat——"

"No lot will I draw for the parlour chairs of red plush," Cassie cried. "Mam said when she bought them, 'Cassie,' she said, 'you take them when the time comes'."

"And no lot will *I* draw," took up Beth, "for my father's bed. I will be the one to treasure the bed he died in."

"And mine is the mahogany chest of drawers in the back room," Aga contributed.

"Tut, tut," said the unquelled Mary Jane, who had moved to a secure corner behind the table, "a few sticks and a jug or two there'll be left for you, Jenkin. Speak up for yourself, man, and don't you be robbed of what you've got a right to." There was a bitter warning in her voice.

"A serious matter this is getting," moaned Jenkin. "For why didn't the old man leave a will!"

Just then, Dilys, who had gone upstairs during the altercation, put her head in at the door and announced excitedly:

"Opened one eye he has!"

"Ha!" exclaimed Jenkin in relief, "perhaps he is coming to. Good that is. Then he shall decide about the furniture. Come, people, let us hurry."

They trooped upstairs.

Eli Prichard lay, a stiff and stark shape, in his candle-lit chamber. They thronged about the bed. But both his eyes were closed again. Dilys assured the others that one eyelid had lifted itself. Beth placed her head over her father's chest and said, as though she was listening to a clock:

"It's going all right."

"A pity we didn't catch him," said Jenkin, "so that he could settle this business." He leaned over the bed close to the still head. "Perhaps not too far gone he is." And he raised his voice: "Dad . . . Eli Prichard . . . ho there . . . open your eyes now . . . Eli, Eli. . . ."

There was no movement. The darkened face lay stern and majestic. It had an austere mien, and the mouth was set in a sharp and self-willed downward curve. And all his shape seemed carved and stony. He would have his religious bouts, too, in his varied life, and could sing a hymn as lustily as any Welshman. He looked now an old stern prophet out of the Bible. The bedclothes fell in statuesque folds from his long, fine shape.

"Black he's going," said Aga, peering into his face watchfully. "Not much use is it to call him, surely. And if he came round, angry he'll be if we bother him. Well enough you know his temper."

"Dad . . . Eli Prichard . . ." shouted Jenkin, "ho there. . . ."

Cassie, who imagined herself the favourite daughter, began to aid her brother. She put a wheedle into her voice too. For some minutes they laboured to bring their father from the shades of the dead. And at last they were rewarded by a slight twitch of the rigid eyelids . . . only for them to slip into absolute rigidity again. Jenkin put his ear to the chest and raised a despairing and perspiring face.

"Beating well it is too," he said.

Beth had an idea then. "Let us sing to him all together his favourite hymn," she said. "*Cwm Rhondda* he liked best and it always was a hymn to rouse him and make him religious after he had been on the booze."

"Ach," Jenkin protested, "don't speak of such things now

when he is in God's hands. Fancy talking about his booze when a man is half-way across Jordan!"

But he agreed that the singing of *Cwm Rhondda* might bring Eli round. And so it did. They pressed about the bed and raised their voices together in the hymn that is the glory of Wales. The lovely lamenting music swelled and sank in the customary Welsh way, with all the ecstasy and the mourning of an old and religious people. Eli hearkened and turned his face from the other bank of Jordan. His eyelids trembled, a slight hiss came from his lips, and the rigid shape of his body moved. . . . Jenkin made a motion to the others to keep singing. . . . And so, Eli's eyes shone out on them, his mouth opened, and they saw again his long, sharp, foxy teeth. . . . Jenkin held up his hand for silence.

Eli did not speak. His pale, pale shining eyes rolled slowly from one face to another. Then Jenkin began:

"Ho now, father, glad we are you have come back for a while. A little matter we want you to settle, because no agreement can we come to amongst ourselves. A will you ought to have made—but there now, no good is it to quarrel about that at this moment. Say you first who is to have the piano."

The dying purple lips moved. The women leaned over the bed to catch the decisive words. But all they heard was, slow and sighing as a breath of autumn wind:

"*My kingdom is not of this world.*"

"Darro me," said Jenkin, anxiety hurrying his protesting words, "hold you now and be nice at this hour! Let our misunderstandings be forgotten now. Your own children it is who are about you, and bury you well they will. Don't you be obstinate now, Dad bach. Help me in this matter. Come you now! A lot of quarrelling and temper there'll be about the furniture unless you say now how it is to be divided. Say you whether the piano is for Beth, or Aga, or Cassie, or for my own little Fannie, your grandchild, who is very musical."

"There's nonsense," Beth exclaimed; "it's my little Megan it is who is most talented——"

But the father's lips were moving again.

"*I go*," they sighed, "*where neither moth nor rust do corrupt.*"

"Provoking this is," said Cassie. "He is not having sense of what we are saying."

The glazed eyes turned on her. Cassie moved back an inch.

And she felt she had lost her chance of the piano. . . .

Then the eyes turned from her and fixed their gaze on nothing.

"Gone he is," shrieked Aga, who was the most excitable of the sisters. "My father is dead!" And she fell into peculiar lamentation, working her face frenziedly, though no tears fell.

"A waste of time it was," Mary Jane remarked, "to bother him. His mind was set on the other world, as was only proper. Jenkin it is who must see to the disposal of the furniture."

Beth, outraged and denunciatory, turned on her sister-in-law: "A wicked woman you are. Please to remember that my father is dead and this is not the time or the place to talk of what he has left."

"Yes, indeed, Mary Jane," her husband protested, "we must wait now until after the funeral."

Mary Jane opened her mouth again, but they turned their backs on her and in the fuss of the moments that followed she was ignored. The blinds had to be lowered, and the neighbours informed of the event, the doctor and the layer-out had to be fetched. Mary Jane took advantage of these moments and slipped quietly out of the house with a pair of vases she had always admired. In half an hour news of the death had travelled over the place. The mourning daughters of Eli Prichard received the condolences of the many visitors that evening. Jenkin went off to the undertaker. The sisters wept at intervals: they experienced grief. "Religious he died," they would say to a visitor. "With holy words in his mouth." And they were glad they were able to say that truthfully, for they were ashamed of their father's reputation as a drunkard, and at one time theirs had been a most respected family.

After the funeral the controversy of the disposal of the furniture was resumed. They gathered together again. Jenkin looked pale and haggard. Mary Jane sitting boldly at his side, he announced to his sisters that by law he was entitled to the piano and, indeed, everything else. He did not want to be hard, however, and had taken into consideration the fact that the sisters had contributed towards the expenses of the funeral. So he and Mary Jane would be content with the piano, the bed linen, the parlour rug, the wardrobe, the sewing machine and his father's shirts of Welsh flannel. His recital was followed by a violent scene. Beth laid hands on her sister-in-law and a fierce struggle ensued. Cassie

attacked her brother with hideous words and a couple of slaps on the face. Aga swooned, and Dilys came in from the kitchen to attend to her. The uproar caused neighbours to intrude. A small crowd collected outside the house. At last the sisters, their faces saturnine and pinched with defeat, departed, vowing dreadful vengeance from their husbands.

And from that day an eternal feud was maintained in the family.

The hare-lipped Dilys was dispatched to a remote village in Cardiganshire. The day of the journey, she carried secretly on her person a sum of fifty pounds, eleven shillings and sixpence. Eli had awakened the day before he died and told her the money was in a stocking that was hidden in the bedroom chimney, and that she was to tell Jenkin it was for his funeral. . . . Dilys had in her box, too, her father's old wooden pipe, his photo in a frame of shells, and his hymn-book, which objects she had begged of her brother. In Swansea she had to change trains. She went out into the town and bought a large box of confectionery and a handsome parrot in a cage. She arrived at her destination in happy spirits and set about her work on the farm with great diligence. Her parrot was her beloved companion.

Half-Holiday

UNLIKE OTHER DAYS, on Saturday afternoon the two o'clock train was always crowded. Clanking and groaning, it drew its rusty way through the little mountain valleys as though complaining of its burden. Clambering up inclines to villages perched like a flock of crows on the lower mountain-sides, the ancient engine puffed and blowed, coming to a standstill at the raw stations with a long disgusted shake of its tail. Out trooped some of the passengers, chattering noisily, others entered with clean, shiny faces and well-blacked shoes. All the valleys were busy, interchanging people, on Saturday afternoon.

The down platform of Nant Y Mynydd station was clamorous with its contribution to this half-holiday crowd of travellers.

Everybody seemed to be speaking at once, and all the voices seemed to be tenor or soprano, with a note of happy hysteria in each, often breaking into male crashes of laughter or high feminine squeals of delight. The young people teased each other, the middle-aged gossiped maliciously, and the old were mocking and boasted of past successes in eisteddfod, on concert platform or in boxing-booth.

The aristocracy of the collection was the Dramatic Society. Old-fashioned the goings-on of singing festivals, boxing matches, football and cantata meetings. The Society, a party of a dozen or so well-dressed and important-looking people, stood in the waiting-shanty apart, listening to their producer, a very lean but intense young ironmonger, who was agonisingly reiterating some instructions. A Welsh translation of Ibsen's *Ghosts* was the play they were performing in a chapel hall early that evening. The ironmonger was the only one who knew about Ibsen. To the others *Ghosts* was a play with lines to be spoken. Nevertheless, the ironmonger knew that talent, passion and unafraid gusto would be declared that evening. Too much gusto was what he was afraid of now, as he spoke.

Near the door of the waiting-shanty stood Walt Matthews, the heavy-weight, with his trainer and a number of supporters. Walt was fighting Tiger Tim Thomas at Gelli. His nose was blue and flat, his face rotund as a Caerphilly cheese and his body wide as a door: while his trainer spoke to him he kept on reading a few lines of a tattered school-tale periodical.

"Those Dramatics," angrily growled the trainer at last, "chatter like a lot of tipsy rooks. Can't hear myself speak."

"'S'all right," a supporter remarked wearily. "Walt's shut up shop and don't hear. That jane's on his mind. He'll fight tonight like a slab of butter put in the oven. Can't anyone," he asked plaintively of the others, "can't anyone tell Walt that she's been the ruin of four boxers already, the . . . the . . . Oh," he concluded in despair, "there's *no* word for her, all the names are compliments for *her*." He looked round savagely, expecting to see the raffish Ellen Evans trip across to them at any moment: she attended all the boxing matches. And Walt was her latest capture.

Walt stood safely enclosed in his great mound of flesh, unseeing, unhearing, aloof as a god. His supporters knew that at times the

cart-load of flesh could flash into vitality like a dry hayrick afire. But for a fortnight it had been turgid with love. His pale blue simple little eyes were hiding in his battered face now. The supporters failed to draw a spark from the majestic pile. They became more insulting, raising their voices, though they failed to overpower the "Dramatics." In the shanty, Blodwen Rees, who had made her money running a chain of public bake-houses, and also manufacturing sarsaparilla mineral water, was loudly declaring that this was the last time she'd play Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*. "Something lighter is what I'm suited for," she cried above the protestations of the others. Really, in some psychic way, she became a remarkable person on the stage, and her performance as Mrs. Alving was grimly moving in its desolation and pathos. But always she pleaded for comic parts, saying she'd suffered enough in real life, having buried two husbands, "wasters both of them, as everybody knows."

The football crowd, however, yelled the most, sewn thickly among the crowd on the platform. Most of the Cwm Parc Rovers were gathered at this station, a sharp, unruly lot puffed up by their great success that season: one-time collier-boys they were, but now on the dole. They had shrill terrier voices, wiry necks and knees: they slapped each other, and when a girl passed, dressed up for the afternoon excursion, they made ceremonious way for her, pressing back and creating an aisle for the embarrassed (or tittering) young dame. A courting couple, bandy-legged Rufus Roberts and blushing Fanny Jones, were also honoured thus, someone whistling Mendelssohn's Wedding March as they advanced.

The Gosen Glee Singers, an elderly set of male vocalists, looked subdued. But, the train being late—as usual, surrounding people began to call for a song. Harris the Boot (he kept a boot-shop), the conductor and always ready to oblige, flicked his tuning-fork. And the respectful silence with which *Ar Hyd Y Nos* was treated gratified for a while Harris the Boot, who was jealous of the Dramatic Society and had waxed the ends of his moustache to points as tall as darning-needles. He closed the song with a grandiose flourish. Immediately, with relieved and greater intensity, the tangled chatter of voices rose again down the platform. The Glee Singers shrank back into unimportance: they were a little out of date now.

"Sport," Harris the Boot was heard to sneer later, "and sickly play-acting, that's all they want now. Hooligans kicking a dirty ball, and painted women and men showing off what had better be hidden." And he glared angrily, for no apparent reason, at a smartly dressed woman who stood near and had an air of not belonging. She was an Italian and kept an ice-cream and sweet-shop with her foreign husband: the silks and furs she wore, her dusky skin and humid eyes, the supple plumpness of her handsome body—all her rather sultry appearance infuriated Harris the Boot. "These Eyetalians that come and take our trade," he muttered to one of the Glee Singers, "they ought to be shoved back under their volcanoes, where they come from."

Here and there were competitors travelling to a little eisteddfod that was opening at five o'clock in Pen Mawr, a village up under the sky and cold and quiet as the grave. These were bards, reciters, vocalists, pianists and violinists, some of the competitors being of tender age and accompanied by parents who gossiped with others of their brilliant offspring's past successes. Little Phyllis Morgans, ten and very thin and determined-looking behind immense wire spectacles, had recited those *Ingoldsby Legends* without one stumble. Eight she was then. The brush and comb she had won had not been used yet. "Saving all her prizes I am till she's married," her mother announced. And she gazed with disparaging malevolence at little Megan Lewis, who was to be Phyllis's competitor that evening, and who, for all her prettiness, would be undoubtedly the loser.

"Frying-pan" Williams—so called because once in his young unrepentant days he had chased his wife out of the house with a pan hot from the fire—gazed about him with suspicious dourness. Some years ago, in a "revival," he had turned from drink and became a kind of amateur preacher, serving up to Heaven the cold meats and small beer of these his drab last years. No one liked him. He had submitted to the eisteddfod a long poem: the subject set by the committee was "The Fall of Babylon." He was always angrily searching for people who called him "Frying-pan" Williams, and thus had come to wear a dark, threatening look. But that afternoon his hostile stare was directed chiefly to Teddy Tucker.

Teddy strode ornately up and down the crowded platform, thrusting a difficult but successful way among the mob. A wide

black felt hat flopped over lank red hair that dropped about his head like liquid fire: he wore, too, a scarlet shirt, yellow tie, and mildew-green corduroy trousers. He was the most successful poet in the valleys, carrying off the bardic prize chair at nearly every eisteddfod. He had once spent a long week-end in Paris, and by trade he was a wallpaper-hanger, working respectably during the week. Week-ends, however, he was the Complete Poet, dressing up and giving a touch of the picturesque to the mining valleys. Only his name worried him, depriving him of that share of dignity to which he felt his fame entitled him. He would not even nod to "Frying-pan" Williams, his fellow-poet in Nant Y Mynydd; he felt that such a man vulgarised the poetic calling.

Still there was no sign of the train. "The engine's broke down," a footballer cried. "She's been threatening to do it every Saturday this winter."

"Where's the station-master?" demanded another. "Always he hides himself on Saturday afternoon. Jacob Watkins," he yelled towards the booking-office the other side, "run astray has the only train you got? Or collapsed it has? Where's the old iron gone? Look now, the eisteddfod starts at four, and the Dramatics' got to start painting their mugs soon."

The station-master remained hidden. Pale gusts of winter sunshine brightened the air, and the day was mild. Though the train was always at least forty minutes late on Saturdays, the travellers had been waiting long before the scheduled time of departure. The Saturday meeting on the platform was not unenjoyable, and the week was drab enough, with so little money in the place nowadays. "Retired" colliers, gaunt and wearing well-brushed old clothes, gazed remotely towards the treacherous colliery that littered the hill-side beyond the station. Not much noise and smoke came from the pits these days. Time was when their clatter and dust filled all the place.

People, however, were not to be subdued and refused to keep silent, like the pits: the clamour on the platform remained undiminished as time went on and still no train appeared. A swift and healthy humour—though at times a little malicious—darted through the chattering, clear voices like trout in a stream. Surrounding folk waited for fireworks when the parading Teddy Tucker accidentally cannoned into "Frying-pan" Williams,

stomach to stomach, but the rival poets merely glared menacingly at each other and turned back curtly into the crowd. Inside the shanty, Dick Prosser, a thick-set and hearty young engine-cleaner, who was to play Oswald Alving in *Ghosts*, winked and leered through the window at plump Harmony Davies. She was a chapel minister's daughter and she was going to perform a Dutch character dance at a concert: her clogs were in a large Gladstone bag, which she swung coyly in front of her.

At last there was a bustling sound up the line, and a few moments later the dingy engine, coughing fussily as if to excuse itself for the delay on grounds of indisposition, crawled into the station. The tail of coaches shook itself twice before coming to a frightened standstill: the worn carriages were already full from stations up the line. There were loud shoutings at doors, struggles and pushings: then the engine suddenly emitted a hoarse bellow. But everybody got into the train successfully. In a minute, except for the guard, the platform was bare as a knife.

At last the station-master sauntered to the platform in the sober manner of his kind; reaching the guard, simultaneously they took out their watches, looked, and returned them to their pockets. Neither spoke, but the guard cynically twirled an end of his moustache and the station-master pursed his lips. After a while the guard vaguely raised his green flag. From the train came sounds of rollicking laughter and tickled screeches.

A loud puffing and gasping through its rusty throat warned everyone that the engine was about to move. The guard gave a significant nod to the station-master and mounted: presently the engine tossed into the air a thick sniff of steam and ambled forward

Yet still there was another delay. A high feminine scream came from the bridge connecting the two platforms. Madame Salome Jenkins, the high-class pianist, was whisking her seventy-year-old legs down the stairs. "Stop! stop!" she shrieked. Her voice rang with fury. No one for fifty miles around could play Chopin so expertly as she. At one time, before marrying Jenkins, the flannel merchant, she had been professional. She had every right to be treated with respect.

The station-master gave a loud blast of his whistle. Madame Salome was a Power. The train had already left the platform, but it stopped, and out popped the guard's head.

"Goodness gracious me, man," snorted the woman, "what's

the train doing almost on time! It's always forty minutes late."

The train was backing. "Can't trust to that always, Madame Jenkins," said the station-master sombrely. But he was respectful.

"Nice thing if I had lost this train," she snapped, "when I got to play the Twenty-Four Preludes at Gilfach."

"Two years ago," he reminded her soothingly, "you played them at Noddfa, our Baptist Chapel. You remember? Eleven pounds off the Building Debt we had out of that concert. Thanks to you."

Grudgingly the train returned. Madame Salome bandied a few words with the guard, criticising the erratic behaviour of his train. It had no right to be suddenly less than forty minutes late, after numberless Saturdays of the old habit. . . . Abusive, she entered a carriage crowded with Cwm Parc Rovers. Her wrinkled face steamed from her recent exertions. But she was sinewy and healthy.

After much struggling and shifting of tangled limbs, a seat was found for her. The young footballers displayed a little deference, withdrawing as much as possible in the overloaded compartment. But she patted her knees and briskly invited one of the Rovers to accommodate himself thereon: he sat there grinning widely.

"Who you're playing today?" she enquired. "My word, you did well last Saturday with Clydach Wanderers. Oi there, stop smoking that fag, Full Back Ben Hughes, it smells as if it was cabbage. I got some better ones here . . . Golly, the train's breaking down already——"

It was true. After sundry shudderings and clankings of its under quarters, the train became dead still; it might have been a corpse.

"Ah well," sighed Madame Salome Jenkins, settling herself as comfortably as possible with the hefty footballer on her elderly knees, "let's have a song to pass the time. Now, boys, all together in *Sospan Fach*. . . ."

The Farm

I

THE FARM HAD BELONGED TO HIS FATHER, but had been there, Powell would declare, since the days when the world was altogether tidy and sweet-smelling as a nut. He treasured his farm without saying too much about it. The house was of washed old stone and lay beside the recumbent body of the hill in drowsy peace. Around it three precious small pieces of respectable earth, one given to turnip, one to corn, one to barley. But cows it was that really kept the place going, their milk taken to the near-by mining valley. There was unstony pasturage for them down the lowland, not much, so that Powell's business never prospered. But all his days the number of his cows remained the same, even when the colliers' wives caught the craze for condensed milk out of tins. No other farm for miles, though within sight a tattered village was perched on the shoulder of the hill; only old people living there—the young adventured off to the mines.

True enough, the place had preserved its good looks, with its everlasting smell of morning and dew. When his daughters were children Powell would say that it was mentioned in the Bible as one of the choicer works of God. But his wife Matilda would contradict him, of course, saying he was conceited, and how did he know what the rest of the world was like? He never went further than his milk cart carried him on business. He had sorrel-red moustaches; she, daughter of the sexton up in the village, looked pliant as a willow wand, but was not.

He despised the mining valley which lay around the corner of the pushed-out purple mountain; once, in his angrier argumentative mood, he called it snot out of the nose of Satan. But they bought his milk there, which enabled him to put a tidy bit by in a bank. But to him life there seemed all roar, whiplashes, hospital, and cemetery. He was always glad to urge his horse to the return journey, coal dust on his red moustaches. Why, you couldn't leave the milk churn uncovered for a minute.

A man of the country, he was easily put out by noises that were

not of nature's make; by grocer's stuff that sought to imitate true meats of the earth; by pavements that entombed roots; by a lamp-post that grew where a tree was. He had married early, snatching Matilda from the village before she could make up her mind to go where all her companions went their dusty way. Five daughters they produced, the first four alike in looks and temperament, blonde and shrill, the fifth of pale brown colouring and slimmer make, quite different. Then, after a while, Matilda died, when she was only about forty, suddenly going tired, almost in a day. She had been out of the place only once, on a visit to her sister, who had married a ship's captain in Bristol.

II

Powell became proud of his five daughters. With every reason. Healthy girls, the four having hair strong and bright as new thatch, the last one an odd and enticing contrast, they filled the farmhouse with a brilliance like perpetual sunshine. Hilda, Bella, Sue, and Olwen the blonde ones, and the sultry olive-skinned youngest called Ruth.

Time was, though, when he felt annoyed about his daughters. So many of them. He wanted a son. At least one, he begged Matilda. Sometimes he accused her of deliberately preferring daughters, believing in the witchcraft of suggestion while she carried. After the birth of the fourth she wanted no more, girl or boy. No, she said, *no*. But Powell kept on urging her to one more try. The next one was sure to be a boy; it stood to reason, after four girls. She believed it to be his fault that they were always girls; she couldn't explain why, but there it was.

As a matter of fact, she had much wanted a son herself. She was not thirty after the birth of the fourth girl. She kept on saying that his children would always be girls. He sulked and said, one more try. About this time, a nasty March month, she went off to Bristol for that holiday with her married sister, who was, Powell said disparagingly, a woman of the world, and she stayed two weeks, bringing back unusual presents for everybody.

Not long afterwards, too, she told Powell that—well, he had had his way again. He rubbed his hands excitedly. Sure to be a boy this time. Yes, she said, a little feeling I have, too, that perhaps our luck has changed. But again, on Christmas Eve, a girl came.

Powell at last abandoned his ambition for a son and made the best of a bad job by forcing himself to take joy in his daughters' rude vitality. So this last one, Ruth, came in for a late-flowered affection. As soon as she was old enough, he would strap her on to a seat in the milk cart and take her on his round, her good body carefully flounced in fine black-and-white flannel. Matilda took to going to chapel a great deal.

Shortly after Matilda's death, he kept on urging his daughters to get married as soon as they had opportunity, for he felt within himself a grievance against life, and he feared that he might become as sour as the butter he couldn't sell since margarine became popular.

"You go out to the world and find fellows," he said sternly. "Healthy you are, and the world turns round and customs change. Don't you stand still and wither here like last year's peas." The responsibility of growing daughters lay heavy on him. But only the first four he urged like that, Ruth being rather young yet.

Fellows there came in abundance. In those days the four daughters rode to the mining valley in a brake from the village, going to socials and tea-parties. They each found a respectable young collier: Powell had announced that to obtain the promised hundred pounds' dowry a daughter must choose a man of decent reputation, chapel-going, and wearing a good navy-blue suit and bowler hat on Sunday. He was alarmed of their wildness at times: strong, hot-coloured girls throwing up their heads in the sun like flaming dahlias on a thick-springing bush.

Matilda the wife going off with such unreasonable suddenness had made him angry too. Only a week ill she was, beginning with a bit of a cold that would have done no harm to a day-hatched chick. It was as if she just walked off over the mountains without once looking back.

It was not right, he had muttered to himself, not right. For a time he was very suspicious and began to doubt his memory of her. Had she been false to him, concealing some woe that worried her? He had fully expected that they both would live until they were between seventy and eighty, and, having been kept warm in the family bosom of their various daughters, die almost together. His life with her had been, except for her inability to produce a son—though he had to admit she had valiantly tried to please him—as nice as eating a crust of home-baked bread with plenty of

new butter on it. She was, after all, a good woman, and he never found her taste bad or tart. She worked and cooked with galloping zest, her energy, it seemed, renewed each dawn like a clock wound up.

Simple and ruddy-faced, his flesh close-knit as oak, he was one of those for whom black is still black, white white. But he knew about life and how you have to pay for joy in this world, one way or another. Health, money, and a pleasant nook had been his for too many years.

III

He soon was obliged to cease the native mourning and sombre grief that the sudden cruel blow to his comfort gave excuse. Having so much of young womankind clamouring about him on the farm, he felt important as a patriarch in the Bible. Life bustled round him. The ardour of his daughters was like a good choir singing in competition. In summer they were rich-looking as corn, in winter fresh and stinging as snow. Except, perhaps, Ruth.

Though she, too, possessed upspringing strength and a manner dashing as a mountain brook in spring, there was on occasion a languid roll to her russet eye, a sensuous droop in her glance, which her direct, unsubtle sisters did not possess. She was the only one who liked to be abed of a morning and leave the cows go hang; she would neglect her share of work in the kitchen too.

Before they were married, her sisters, in anger, would not hesitate to assault her, exasperated by her alien indolence. In such a household as theirs it was a crime to neglect work; the farmhouse was always clean and sweet. Ruth, however, was not too bad, and as she got older she improved—which improvement the sisters declared due to their beatings. She improved because she developed a way of doing work in half the time her sisters took, owing to a different brand of sense in her.

"She got only a bit of flavour, like a marrow," the first daughter, Hilda, declared. After her mother it was she who was female boss in the household.

"Yes," agreed Bella, the second daughter, "she's watery. Not so plain as a marrow, though," she added justly. "Sometimes like an actress she is."

Sue, the third, put in malignly, "Never will she have much breasts. Like hard little green sprouts they are." Her own already swung like prize pears. "And her behind's flat as a lily leaf on the duckpond."

"Not so flat, though," Olwen, the fourth, said, "as that cake she tried to bake on Saturday. Ugh, it would have done to scotch a cart on a hill. God help the man that has her."

Yet each knew that there was a set-apart quality in their sister that made her like a painted china ornament on the mantelpiece, while they remained usable earthenware jugs on the table.

"Sixteen in April," the first, Hilda, began again, "and she can't cut a flannel petticoat yet."

"She'll never want to," said Bella disgustedly. "A guinea silk one from a shop is what her legs crave."

"Hush, she's coming——"

The four were washing their hair in the little courtyard behind the house; it was a June Saturday afternoon. They washed their bright hair in a tubful of glittering suds and in the hot, splashing sunlight, shaking out the abundant threads and presently swathing their head tops in grey towels, so that they looked as if they wore helmets. This was before they were married and while their mother still lived.

Ruth was entering the gateway. And she allowed the geese to come with her: white, heavy birds with extra-fierce necks. But when with Ruth they trod the earth with a less angry step and their fans seemed to display some measure of ponderous joy, flapping heavily. Now and again she would caress their sinewy throats, liking the excitement that ran through the plumage under her fingers.

"Don't you bring those geese in here," bawled Hilda. The grey-and-red flagstones were scrubbed daily by her.

Ruth took no notice of the fury of her eldest sister's voice. The geese trod around her; she walked among them, liking their look of attendant court women. Her skin was tawny and she refused to wear the stays her mother had bought for her. "Keep your temper down," she called back coolly. "These geese never misbehave when they're with me."

But Hilda refused to believe that. She had been suddenly roused by her sister's entrance into the courtyard, suggestive of some royalty attended by a retinue. She dashed in abusively

among the geese, ready to strike Ruth. The geese shrank from her swirling skirts, squawking hysterically. Their black eyes glittered, their stiff necks swayed. Hilda's fist struck her sister a blow on the shoulder. Ruth tore off the towel from Hilda's head and took handfuls of the damp, coarse hair in her twisting hands.

An electric shudder passed over the dozen or so geese; their heavy bodies contracted and swelled. Led by a heaving gander, they attacked Hilda, thrusting rods of white anger among her clothes; the beak of one drew blood at an ankle. Hilda kicked out. The other sisters rushed to her rescue. There was a great storm of skirts, flashing arms, and terrible shrieks; the geese began to cower back.

The sisters' father, riding-whip in hand, appeared in the doorway. Behind him the roused face of his wife.

"Oi there," he roared, "what's this row? Oi now! Ah!" Seeing a bloody scratch on Bella's cheek and another's hair being pulled like a cow's tail, he strode over and began freely to lay his whip about, commanding a cessation of the battle.

Swiftly, like a hawk, the mother pounced on him and tore the whip from his hand. "Across your own face you want it?" she screamed. "Leave my daughters alone."

After much panting and oaths they sorted themselves out. But Ruth had disappeared. The geese, too, were skulking out of the gateway, not hurriedly, but with offended sullenness. Only one remained, ominously crouched on the ground, as though in a swoon. Its leg was broken. Discovering this, the farmer forgot that he had been made a deacon in the chapel only three weeks since; he called his daughters several things.

Ruth hid herself among the willows down by the stream. Sometimes, truly, she longed to adore her sisters. But she felt shut out from them, and she accepted their dismissal of her with a toss of the head. They shut her out from their pranks in the big bedroom and their whispered consultations. Oh, she wished she had been born a boy, so that a pair of trousers would protect her from their gross taunts and their pointing to her slim legs as evidence of her inferiority to them.

She saw them bearing down on her now from the pasture above the stream, four big girls with arms entwined, aflow hair shining like brass. They would grip her and duck her in the stream. She stood on her legs like a hare, then beautifully leapt the rocky

stream and disappeared into the small tangled wood the other side. There she crawled into a secret bed among the undergrowth to which she often repaired for an afternoon sleep, liking sleep.

But though her mother treated her with distant respect, as if she were afraid and did not want to let her troubled gaze rest too much on her, she knew her father relied on her for the sweet favours of esteem and affection. She was his darling, and, as she could see already, a good comfort to him. And though she herself was vexed that she was not a boy, she was not too discontented, having early recognised that life is both a kick on the rump and a Christmas party with presents for everybody.

IV

The four daughters marrying, all within two years, widower Powell was left alone with Ruth at the farm. Declaring that only in Him was security, Powell took exclusively to God for some months, walking to chapel on week-days and, if there was no worship, dusting the pews. Then a ghostly and patient heifer died of neglect. Powell shuddered and looked around his possessions. Hedges gone slovenly, the turnip field rank with weeds. In the dairy the pans without lustre: butter unsold and smelly. He shouted at Ruth; she agreed with his complaints and suggested that he sold the farm and bought a pub in the near-by colliery district. He took a fierce offence at that and, since they were standing near it, caught her and threw her in the duckpond, greatly irritating six or seven goslings, who left in grey disorder. Ruth scrambled out and threw a stone at him, hitting an apple tree twenty yards to his left. Later, she got out of him three pounds for a new dress, so had the best of the row. She realised, however, that he worshipped the farm and urged him to get two or three hands to live in, convincing him that even the household work was too much for her.

"You get married, Ruth fach," he said at last broodily. "Don't you think of me." He ended on a cunning whine, though, being a just and simple man, he really wished for her the natural lot of young people. "My plateful I've had out of life and now I must eat of bygones. The wife, your mother, slipping off like that, so sly, has done for me."

"I'll stay here with you and bring a husband home some-day," she said comfortingly.

"They are all gone," he said mournfully, "to where those coal-pits are. No young chaps hereabouts that want to work clean and old-fashioned."

After much advertising, though, he got a couple of chaps out of Carmarthen, being obliged to pay their train fares all the way. One—who said everybody called him Nan—was offhand and scowling in manner, though he had a pretty rose-and-white face like an aristocrat; he was twenty and he soon taught the young stallion to jog his hoofs to the "Flower Song" out of *Carmen*, which he played on a mouth organ. The other, Bandy Isaacs, had legs curving out; Ruth was stirred by his purple-black hair and sulphurous eyes, though the lanky, rude-mannered Nan, complexioned like a girl, excited her most to the bouncing display of hostility roused in her towards men at about this time, her nineteenth year.

At first she led the two young men an evil dance, being the grand young mistress, cracking the whip over them, always finding them jobs to do, insulting them for incompetence, and abusing their home district, where people couldn't speak much English, being so backward. Nastily she spoke to them in English, using words they had never heard before; she held back their wages and, if they went to the mining valley of a Saturday evening, demanded a detailed account of their doings there. First, she put them in the same bedroom, then she separated them, then said the barn was good enough for Bandy and nearly brought it off, if her father hadn't turned unexpectedly critical of this decree.

The young men bore with her. She had that hot power before which, however much it burns them, such as they like to stand. It was Nan who turned on her first. She had made him, in addition to his official farm duties, help her with the domestic labour. At mangle and with pail he worked in the house, a canvas apron round his lean waist, his complexion rose-pink. But he was not deficient in natural attributes, as Ruth found to her cost one day when they were alone in the house and he clumsily knocked over a ewer of sloe gin. She flew out at him, slapping his beautiful complexion. The young man heaved her up as if she were a small sack of potatoes and chucked her on a sofa. He shouted:

"Your backside I'll beat so as you'll never sit down again. Ugly owl of a bitch. Ach, shall I pull you by the hair and throw you to the pigs?"

All the time pummelling and doing damage with such wrath that her screeches ceased and she whimpered entreatingly. Suddenly he stopped and, lifting up the tipped ewer, drank the mouthful or so left unspilt. Then cruelly he went out. She rolled off the sofa and beat her fists against the floor, moaning. She did not forgive him for some weeks.

V

Every Sunday four bowler hats hung in a row on the pegs in the passage. They belonged to the husbands of the married daughters: four young colliers earning good money at this time. They and their wives swarmed over the house possessively as resident beetles. Sometimes the wives would take a picture away with them, or a vase, or a piece of brasswork off the dresser, and always a bit of farm produce. Since going to live in the mining valley, where they had neighbours, they had become greedy, ambitious, and show-off.

At this time Ruth did not mind their new habits; she seemed to have no regard for domestic possessions. Only sometimes, if she were in a temper, she would use their stealing as an excuse for denouncing them. Once she threatened to send to Bella's home a policeman, to recover a couple of pewter plates; but again the four married women, two of them extra indignant because they were about to become mothers, assaulted her.

"My daughters," complained Powell in his prayers at last, "trot round me like steaming mares. Manes they have, that go up in a storm. Like legs their arms, and their fists like hoofs. Male women they are and of disposition contrary to ladies'. Say to my wife Matilda, where she is up there, that I am weary of earth and my heart grizzles for accommodation in Zion. Crops bad, daughters too much, and people buying that condensed milk in grocer shops. No profit last quarter. Aye, only loss by Thy will, God, though an old man am I getting. Surely not quite fair is it. Have a look at the hairs of my head now and see how they are going white to the roots with worries."

This was after Hilda had demanded a hundred pounds to help buy a house. The just-gone year had not been successful on the farm, the first to so behave. Powell was frightened; he had never faced failure in his life before, except the semi-failure to produce a son. Orders for milk were falling off. Lorries began to take milk to the mining valleys from distant farms, arriving hours before his yellow-and-green cart. Should he have a lorry? But he couldn't bear thought of it, though he was obliged to ask Bandy and Nan if they could or would drive one. They wouldn't answer one way or the other. At last he decided against the lorry and said quite severely to God:

"The lorries go over the mountains fast as deer. But ugly they are and smelly and full of noise. A horse is not ugly and is brown or white or grey or black and shining always, smelling when he drops dung only or pees as Thou made him to, and then for a short time only; and his noise goes in the ear pleasantly as the noise of a woman satisfied or a man well-off. Therefore wherefore the lorries, Almighty? Not allowed they should be. Churns of cow's milk on them is nasty to see. For condensed milk all right, which comes out of the udders of engines and tastes of wheel grease. Uch, don't You allow it for long now."

He was pleased when he read or heard of motor-car accidents; they seemed to him evidence of the wrath of God. Around him the green-and-lilac mountains disposed themselves grandly as of old; he could forget that the far sides of them were whipped raw by the coal industry. Life was still sweet-smelling to him, in spite of cold-stomach worries. Justly he said again to Ruth, "Marry some safe chap. One out of the world of coal, if respectable he is. Don't you think of me." But when he spoke so he looked lonely and old and his air of wanting to do right by her was acting humbug.

She knew that he would loosen his hold on earth and go to pieces if she left him. But she was now itching to get a few slaps from life; she would enjoy a good spree. Or a fight or something. The days on the farm were too nice, too clean, like a bunch of flowers. A pub among the rough collieries now! She had begun to look twenty. But still she loved the old man.

Her shrill sisters kept their predatory eyes on her. Each had cut her famous hair in the new fashion, disgusting their father, who withheld his usual money Christmas presents that year. They

blamed Ruth and venomously accused her of mischief with the two farm-hands. She said, what of it? And whose body was she using, anyway? They reported to the old man, who told them to mind their own business, unbelieving.

One afternoon she sat singing and shelling beans in the front patch of garden. The roses were bad that summer, short-lived and dry and without scent. No rain at all and the earth hot like a fever. The gate opened and in came a shonny-onions, a beret on his head and on a shouldered pole four plaited strings of goldenred onions. At first the traditional hostility to intruders sprang in her and with arched neck she shouted:

"Out from here. Now then!"

The young vendor rolled dark eyes at her. She stared. There was a lightning flash between them. He said, in his careful learned-up English:

"Two shillings and sixpence one bunch. Cheap. Forty in a bunch. Best onions. Cheap."

"You come to a farm with onions!" She thought it necessary to shout to a foreigner, for him to understand. "When we grow them! And very dear yours are."

"From Brittany," he said firmly, unmoved by her redness and shouting. "Best onions. Cheap." A faint moustache was smudged about his mouth. His thighs and torso seemed sleek and youthful in a very bright pair of striped cotton trousers and a kind of blouse, which oddly attracted her; she smiled in her mouth. She admired his slimness and delicately alert look, like a greyhound.

"Where do you come from?" she asked abruptly.

"Brittany," he said silkily. "You will give me please a glass of water?"

"Where is that?" she asked, fumbling among her schooldays.

"France."

She sat aroused in interest she had never experienced before. She did not move from the stool for a quarter-hour, questioning him with direct, hungry curiosity. He with a dozen more were lodging in Cardiff; they had brought over from Brittany a boatload of onions which they stored in a warehouse, and they were now spread out in the country, taking with them small loads by train. They would stay months before returning to Brittany. He was unmarried, and, no, he had never been to Paris. The sea

was at the door of his home and, behind, flat fields. Yes, he was a Catholic. She sat breathing of his oddness and strangeness and at last remembered the water. Or would he have milk or beer? Or a cup of tea? And some cake?

She took him into the kitchen. Her nostrils were quivering at his alien strangeness. Here was something peculiar out of a far world. She had never seen a moustache smudged down about lips like that before. Nor such smooth-looking nice legs. Ambling and heavy the gait of all she had seen before. He took a glass of beer and a thick wedge of cake.

"All of your onions," she said, "I'll buy. But a reduction I must have on a quantity."

He beamed at her above the tankard. "Thank you very much, mees," he said softly, and stood waiting, his dark eyes full and round with wondering interest. She bustled about, stepping on her quick, small feet like a dancer.

"Surely now you are not going back to Cardiff today?" she asked abruptly, almost bad-temperedly.

"I have to fetch more onions," he said, waiting still, in the strange house. But he had given several quick glances around, and he stood alertly listening.

"You can sleep in our barn," she said angrily. "And go back by bus early tomorrow."

He nodded, suspiciously round-eyed. The heap of onions gleamed a hot gold on the floor. There was a silence; it closed about them. She bustled about again, throwing coals on the fire.

"The daughter of the house I am," she said haughtily.

And when her father and Nan and Bandy came in for their late meat tea, she announced all particulars of the young man with a bossy confidence, daring them to criticise her determination to offer him hospitality. But Powell welcomed him, after a moment's suspicious glance, and the two talked professionally of soil and vegetables. Only Bandy's horse-long face looked malign; Nan treated the foreigner with an offhand smile.

He was merely a shonny-onions, it was true. And not much mind to him, as far as she could judge. Yet he was fine and smooth and sharp. French? Ah! It was Chinese she had always brooded on, but in the end she knew they would frighten her. What about the French? She did not ponder for long, for it was not her habit.

If she pondered, she went into a fog and didn't do anything. She hated looking sideways. Always straight before her, the way she wanted to go. She came to an understanding with the Frenchie that night in the barn. Towards daybreak she got out of the eaves ten pounds, put on her best silk stockings, wrote a note to her father, and was off in a scarlet sunrise over the mountains with the foreigner. His name was André and, though he was frightened, he liked young women very much. This one was overwhelming, but her presence had a bite which was much to his taste.

As for Powell, when he read the note he bellowed and belched. Then he collapsed into a chair and whined for an hour. O Lord, how soon were the days of man over. He was done for. On his eyelids was the shadow of death. Swollen was his heart, also his feet. Let his hair be trimmed by a good barber, ready for death. He compared his soul to a brook that was there yesterday and was now dried up. Then he shouted at Bandy to take the offensive onions and fling them into the duckpond. Towards evening he forgave his daughter, the beautiful kind Ruth, and saw how the young must do something, and in their own way, to save their souls later on.

VI

His small patches of wheat had been cut the next year when she returned, on a hot August Saturday evening. Bandy and Nan had gone by bus to the cinema in the mining valley, and the woman servant returned to her home up in the village. Powell sat trying to read the English language properly in a copy of *John Bull*, which a travelling salesman had left behind. The latch clicked and Ruth stood before him, in a silvery coat and a hat pushed out boldly over her crimped hair. Blue pearly drops swung from her ears, and in one hand she carried a small suitcase, in the other a black portable gramophone, black as sin. She smiled, though she looked very hot in her coat on a hot August evening.

"Well, well, Ruth fach," he said suspiciously. What he had read in the periodical had confused and astonished him, and so he wondered if his sight was playing him a trick.

"There's bare the place is!" she said, glancing round, her gaze

beginning to glitter as she realised that her sisters had been at their antics again.

"Aye," he said heavily, "bare, bare." He tidied up his long moustaches, into which he had dribbled. But they still sprouted well and still they held their tint of sorrel-red.

She was back in the house as though she had taken an afternoon trip to the seaside. She soon had a meal going, six rashers off the frosty-looking hunk of bacon hooked to a beam, and eggs fried in the singing salty fat, very delicious and smelling of home. He finished the peculiar story in the paper and, called to the table, went. Grace was asked, the evening being so near Sunday. The coat glistened on the back of a chair.

"Nice coat!" he mumbled wonderingly. "You bought it in that place—now, what is it called? Paris?"

"No, Bristol," she said.

His jaw dropped. He waited cautiously, dull anger stirring in him. She asked after her sisters. Vindictively, she got out of him a long list of what they had taken from the house and from him; he saw her cheekbones harden, her eyes shine like oil. From these signs he assumed that she intended staying at home.

"France you liked very much?" he suggested at last.

Secure in her air of success, she told him presently that she had got no further than Bristol, where a rich seed merchant had wanted to marry her. "But I had to come back," she said flatly; "and a big trunk full of things I have in the station for you to fetch on Monday in the milk cart." She implied that, having seen the world and obtained her fling, she was satisfied now, and intended settling where she rightly belonged. She spoke of towns as if, for human beings of good class and wholesome tastes, they were places unfit to inhabit.

"Why for you didn't go to France?" he demanded. "With that shonny-onions."

She shook her head. "Very simple he was," she said dismissingly.

"And here was I telling people you were travelling in foreign parts!" he exclaimed. Shocking that she had been across only a troughful of water to Bristol. Misbehaving not far from the doorstep! He wanted to seize her, to throw things at her. But she was so grand and well-dressed and a lady. And his anger was not like it used to be. He felt like a tree in winter, draughty and

without warmth of leaves. So he went over by the fire and sulked.

"How's the milk now?" she asked, businesslike.

He entered into a long, slow whine of his troubles. Only two churns a day now. Mothers fed their young with condensed milk and even chapel ministers ate margarine. Soon there'd be no cows left in the land, for was not margarine made out of turpentine, boiled old boots, and cast-off clothes; condensed milk out of coal and drowned corpses taken from the river in London?

"We must have a lorry," she said decisively, "and take the milk where it's wanted."

He looked at her wearily, his nervous fingers feeling his paunch, that still showed round as a harvest moon. He shrank from her decision and yet was glad that she spoke so, beyond him. And for one thing he was grateful—that the grave remained as it ever was, peaceful, as created by God. He watched Ruth's swinging hips, in their bright-spotted silk. Yes, punishment was due to her. But she was grown, and he couldn't beat her.

"For this what you've been doing," he said darkly, "you must pay. In chapel. A lot in the collection plate, and a Sunday-school teacher you must become—very short of them we are."

"Oh, all right," she said.

The men arrived. Bandy pursed his lips malignly and his bandy legs went bandier with fear; she had always been like a Fury pursuing him, but since she had gone his life had been dull without battle. Nan, who had come to man's mental estate since her departure, looked her over patronisingly, as though she were a ewe in the County Show, a second-prize one, but still worthy of notice. She looked at them closely for a second or two and then set about the domestic tasks exactly as she had left off a year ago. The day woman she sacked in the morning.

So she settled down, after she had powerfully disposed of her clacking and squawking sisters, who were filled with black joy and horror at her evil. . . . "Now then, Father," they pointed out, "see what a bad lot she is and don't you leave her the farm." But he, whose aspect had suddenly become mild and beneficent again, said, "Peace now, peace for the sunset that is on my days." Scandalised, they filed out of the house, their husbands under their bowler hats, and Ruth at the door calling, in a low, harmonious voice, "Thief," for stealing this, or that, meaning some Nantgarw tureen, or oak chair, or steel fender.

She chose Nan, but waylaid Bandy first, seeing that Nan was so rude. Bandy it was who must have the lorry; his nerves were substantial and he was a male man who could shave twice a day, et cetera. She gave him a book from her trunk, which he could not read, writing in it, "Bandy, his book from Ruth his friend," but to Nan she gave only a small bundle of picture postcards depicting ships, also out of the trunk, which she kept locked. For her father she had brought two suits of pink silk underwear, which he wore when some big preacher preached in chapel or at some other festival.

But Nan was so rude, for he seemed to know she was glad of his new pushed-out chin, his assured stuck-out knees, that she saw he was a man meet for her to marry. More than once he told her that she smelt of French onions. His gaze was baldly lewd, as if she were a penny peep-show, Paris by Night, in the Fair. Before Nan's eyes she cupped her hand over Bandy's chin and drew him out into the garden at night-time, swinging her hips. When she returned, Bandy very hostile, Nan would be extra abusive, more loudly insulting, so that she was appeased a little.

Till at last, on Christmas Eve, her birthday, he gave way. She had dressed a tree, and among the dark, delicate boughs she had hung a penny matchbox, packed in brown paper and tied with cotton, his name scrawled neatly on it. Dressed in white, she lit the purple, green, and gold candles, her face sad and serious for once. All day she had been sombre and given to irritable exclamations, but now she had gone into a kind of mourning. The tree was her fancy; no one else took much notice of it. But when the others had gone to bed, Nan unhooked his little parcel and found inside the matchbox a note, "Ruth loves Nan." So instead of going to his own room he went to hers, throwing off his clothes without saying a word.

And later, softly weeping with joy, she held up a cloth like a red-stained trophy. So he stayed, and the second time had nothing of hate.

VII

The mountains stay still and in the mornings say their say like trumpets and in the evenings sleep like young lions, their green hair about their shoulders. Sunday morning it is now, and nothing

extraordinary is there in that. And yet extraordinary it is. Tidy is my heart, gone is my gout, and the air goes in my nostrils like the smell of apples. And the man Nan says of my daughter good things, asking for her in marriage.

Thus Powell's mind moved, as he stood on the doorstep of his farmhouse, looking around the fresh winter-cold domain. He was pleased. Master Nan was a good young farmer and had no hankerings after frivolous things. And Ruth, with native cunning, had preserved her jewel among the thieves and pawnbrokers of towns, and yet had not gone unshod, unclothed, or unfed. Virtue lost must be tolerated in a person like a wooden leg, he mused further, but virtue preserved is money hoarded in a bank that will never go bankrupt.

So no more he shouted at her, his cheeks going purple in repressed excitement. And the grave, a beautiful, beautiful bed, seemed nearer, and now he would lie in it with no worries as to who was despoiling his beloved land. He heard the snap of his closed ledger.

Bandy, bitter and baulked, handed in a month's notice when he heard, saying, "I am going to Canada, by sea." Farmers were wanted there, and there people were honest and one-faced. Ruth threaded new tapes in the knees of his flannel drawers and gave him, out of the trunk, a Bristol photo of herself seated on a sofa beside a Grecian temple, a bunch of roses in her hand. She urged him to take care of his weak chest in foreign winters.

The lorry was ordered. Nan took lessons. Powell said he would not ride in it. Nan could take churns to the valleys, but he would deliver milk near-by in the cart, drawn by his inseparable friend, the grey mare Vic. The lorry was to be, however, his wedding present to them. And the farm was to be theirs too; a new will was drawn up.

Ruth had the pleasure of cutting two of her sisters in the main street of the mining valley, where she and Nan had gone one Saturday afternoon to buy things. "Greediness has taken their minds," she said to Nan indignantly, "since they took to living here. Horrid is the place, surely. So grand are they by coming here, stuck up, always fighting their neighbours for the advantage of this and that."

"Ugly the place is," Nan agreed. "But full of life."

The place was roaring in its Saturday night, the streets were

in conflagration. Men were chucked out of pubs and fought in the gutters; strike leaders shouted at some corners, roving preachers at others. As a woman stepped briskly out of a ladies' lavatory, she was set upon by a married-looking woman waiting for her beside the shadow of a doorway; and the shrill ancient accusation of harlot was mingled with scratched-out blood. Stale, smelly air was breathed out of the cinemas. The dark chapels, squat as toads, raised their faces stonily; but tomorrow there would be nice singing in them, and repentance.

"There's a bellyful here," Ruth remarked.

"And a belly-ache, I should say," Nan said. Very country-bred, and refined in a queer way, he, too, was always astonished at the goings-on of industrialism, like his father-in-law-to-be.

They took the bus back. Only round the corner of the mountain, like turning the page of a picture book, the scene changed, and there was country such as the Almighty had in mind when shifting the hills about and arranging pasture, wood, stream, and bush-clump in such manner as pleased His shrewd eye. White now with the moon.

The Zinnias

"THE COUNTRY," Owen said, "is there!" He pointed to where the scarred mountain humps yielded to a vista of vague crab-coloured flat land. "We can walk to it easy. My father's been there and brought nuts and blackberries back. We can *explore*," he urged, adding in bitter familiar knowledge of them: "There's nothing on these mountains. Come on."

Emrys, the cautious one of the two, gazed sceptically towards 'the country.' It seemed so far away. But he too was a little bored. It was the second week of the holiday and already the delights of black pit river, railway line and the everyday mountains had palled. Why couldn't he go to the seaside like some of the other boys in his school! But his mother, dropping pit singlets in the tub and sweating in the steam, had shouted: "I'll give you

seaside on the backside if you don't clear out. Go on, go up the mountain for a walk with Owen next door." But she gave him a penny, and Owen also produced a penny.

"D'you know the way there?" he asked, doubtful.

"'Course I do," Owen said boldly. "Come on. It's the *country*, like you see in those books in school. Birds and squirrels. Bats and flowers that anyone can pick. Let's go!" he cried, becoming shrill in these visions. "P'raps we can catch a squirrel."

Emrys felt for the penny in his pocket, and twitched down his jersey in decision. "Come on, then."

"Hey, not so fast!" ordered Owen, since he felt boss of his adventure. "You can't run there."

Two small boys already smudged with the day, they scampered down the bald mountain slope and then went with sedate secrecy between the long blocks of grey dwellings—who knew but some obscure power might withhold this country trip from them. They passed over the purple-speckled road skirting Bwlch colliery with its stack belching and its screens clattering. Then across a path on the huge loose tips of slag and waste, menacingly steep but which they negotiated nimbly as monkeys. Owen declared this was a short cut.

The other side of the tips was a kind of unused land, broken and stagnant, where the derelict buildings of an abandoned by-product experiment stood gloomy even in the yellow glow of the August day. Their clear knowledge of the district ended here. Emrys was for exploring the fascinating ragged buildings, but Owen was still obsessed with his country vision and its free fruit and flowers for everybody. "Over there!" he kept on pointing instinctively. "There!"

Up alien paths winding over slopes still bitten to the rock by colliery activities, down strange roads where the detached houses now made defeated efforts to be not as their neighbours were. The morning drooped into a pink afternoon. "Over there!" insisted Owen. "See, the rich are living by here."

"I can smell the country already," Emrys said valiantly. "Let's buy a bottle of pop and a cake."

"There'll be a farm in the country," Owen bustled, "where we can have tea and tomatoes."

But the solid groups of stone houses dragged on and on, and it was plain that the paradise was not yet. Soon there was another

colliery, and all the black ruinous waste about it, and the familiar grit and the clanking wagons. "Hoy!" A scowling man looked out of a little shed. "You keep off this railway or you'll be summonsed." They hurried. "We got to go over that mountain," panted Owen. "See!"

The mountain was only a small disembowelled hill, grey-coated and lumpy with rocks. And the other side was full of the same old rows of miners' dwellings. But, far away in the ceaselessly enticing distance, a whitish road went out of the place. It began winding houseless round the opposite hill's flank. A few skimped trees lagged along it.

"There!" Owen pointed triumphantly. "You see!"

"I'm hungry," Emrys flagged, "I'm thirsty."

He insisted on going into a parlour-shop they found among the dwellings below. The woman, who had a moustache, gave them a glass of home-made small beer and a rock cake each. "Travelling you two esquires are?" she asked the strangers. Owen, though very cautiously, said they were going to see the country. "You want to go to Carmarthenshire for that," she replied, scratching an armpit. As, intimidated by her moustache, they meekly went out she gave them another cake for nothing.

Refreshed, they went on with more belief. Both instinctively shrank from asking for information. The country magic was surely to be found round the corner, and its mystery must not be discussed with strangers. Grown-up strangers, who often possessed such depressing powers, particularly must be avoided. They found the lonely whitish road with undelayed certainty.

Its length, yielding nothing of interest, was a trial. But it led at last to flattish open land over which the sullen presence of the mountains still brooded. But there were glimpses of broken-hedged rough fields, clumps of trees, and a white farmhouse perched uneasily on a far eminence. There was also a crooked road of scattered big houses nestling among bushes and green patches. And at their feet a curly brook of clean water tumbled and chased itself in true holiday fashion. Of flowers there were no signs yet. Two birds dodged a way up the brook. Undoubtedly it was the country, for there were no long rows of houses, no pubs or chapels, and the air was silent and smelled different.

"It's the country!" said Owen softly. "Well see a squirrel in a minute. Hush." Their first advance was as if on tiptoe.

The little place was drowsily empty in the afternoon sunshine. They spent an hour vainly searching for a squirrel. There was not even a cow. Only a morose-looking old horse too weary to bend to the grass in the flowerless fields. Not a nut or a blackberry could be seen, or remarkable coloured bird. The white farmhouse seemed far away as ever. Polite because of their consciousness of being strangers, they expressed no criticism of this country thriftiness. Perhaps here, too, happy things had to be stoutly sought and fought for, as at home.

"P'raps there's fish in the river?" Owen said hopefully. "There's some fish that's coloured like rainbows. I'd like to take a fish home."

"It must be past tea-time," Emrys began urging. "Didn't we ought to be starting back? It'll be dark——"

"Look!" suddenly whispered Owen.

They had come to a gate wide open before a sweep of gravelled road. On one side was a dark, high hedge, on the other a large stretch of the greenest and softest grass they had ever seen. But it was something else that had caught Owen's darting eyes. Flowers! They grew in two big round patches cut in the grass, and the dazzling splendour of their colours was startling.

"I told you!" hissed Owen in triumph. "I told you there were flowers in the country. We can take 'em home. Come on." He ran on the velvet grass. Emrys followed more slowly. But his eyes too were entranced.

Their bare, dirty knees went carefully among the zinnias set in mathematical precision in those circles on the elegant lawn. Colours of blood, of money, of cat's eyes, of dark oranges and grapes. Snatching and pulling, they piled the stiff, well-bred flowers into their arms.

"We'll take 'em all," Owen said placidly, and waded into the second circle.

Their dazzled eyes had not noticed the villa far back behind a short wavy hedge. But they heard a car grinding to sudden standstill on the gravel. A squat man in a black trilby hat got out and stood for a moment as though stunned.

"What's the matter with him?" Emrys muttered, taut-kneed.

The man advanced with the peculiar agonised heaves of a frog.

His precious zinnias, his darlings, that only this year he had brought to perfection! He was one of those who find in cultivation of such flowers ease from the frustrations of a hostile world. All day long in his city office their colours lay in the pit of his stomach, which otherwise was a disappointed one.

From the shorn circles two pairs of round eyes watched his advance. A yellowish flush swelled and drained in his face, never an agreeable one, as his employees knew only too well. The fury of his voice was the more frightening for the anguish in it.

"What are you doing?"

"Picking flowers to take home to my Mam!" Owen said, mechanically. One penny-coloured bloom fell from his loaded arms.

At the ensuing bellow Emrys dropped his bundle and ran. Owen chucked his down and followed. Two dirty, ragged small boys in startled flight across a sunlit lonely lawn. Their knees flew swift.

When at last they saw there was no pursuit, Owen babbled from the foam round his mouth: "I thought . . . I thought the country flowers was for everybody. They wasn't in a shop . . . I got a stitch in my side!" he wailed.

"Come on," panted Emrys. "It'll be dark soon." Over his shoulder he glanced fearfully into the first still shade of evening. "I don't like the country."

And up in the villa the cultivator of zinnias—they were now heaped on a table—was storming at his wife, who liked her drop of drink but not, for some years, him. The zinnias tragedy was made the occasion for a return to one of their many disputes. In his anger he finally swept the flowers off the table. His heel stamped them into the carpet and their broken colours ran into each other uglily, like ill-matched dyes.

The Wages of Love

It was a wet early November evening when Olga, after twelve years' disgraceful absence, arrived home again. The rusty mountains wept, the bobbing chrysanthemums in the back gardens were running with liquid coal-dust. A wind whipped through the valley and rubbed stingingly at her silken legs. Above her ginger fur coat her sick done-in face peered like someone in awful woe.

She found no welcome. No one to meet her. Leaving her bags at the station, she climbed a steep road among sullen stony dwellings flung down like sneers on the world. At one of these, the nineteenth in a long row, she knocked timidly, her tongue licking over her dry lips. Wagons clanked under the slope below, backing out of the colliery yard. A woman in a shawl and man's cap hurried past, carrying a jug. After a long interval, the door opened and a bulky woman stood there, on her face a frown ready to develop into active hostility. The two were sisters.

"Sara," murmured Olga timidly, "you got my telegram?"

"Yes, I did. Telegram indeed! A fit I nearly had. Thought someone was dead. 'Stead of which," she added in great grievance, "you it is." After blocking the doorway during this and narrowly scrutinising her sister and the fur coat, she stood aside grudgingly. "I s'pose you'd better come in. But I wonder you didn't go to Mary Ann's house, not come here. . . . I hope the neighbours haven't seen you," she went on in aversion.

Falteringly Olga entered. From the ajar doorway down the dark passage came subdued murmurs. "There's some of the family," Sara said, adding jeeringly: "Come to have a look at you. Go in."

Olga shrank. But hadn't she come back to seek forgiveness? And to mortify her wicked flesh? Entering the kitchen, she made an effort to strengthen her sagging neck, that was still lovely, but once had been proud as a swan's. Around the family hearth of her childhood a ring of hostile faces looked up in the red firelight. Red angry faces.

This was the Prodigal Daughter: the Black Sheep: the Family Disgrace. Whose tricks (they declared, in spite of an operation for gall-stones) had sent her mother to the grave, her father following not long afterwards. This was she who had wounded irreparably the family honour, stained its chaste history. Her sisters never sat in chapel now but with deflated seats.

"Fur coat, ha!" Blodwen, her other sister screeched. "Come down here to show-off, has she?"

"More likely," Sara barked, "down and out she is, and come to live on our poor backs. They got to dress up. Strumpet!"

"Light a lamp," called Tomos, Blodwen's husband, "and let us see her plain." The lamp was lit. They saw her pinched, defeated face, her sunken eyes, and their power rose.

"What you come back for?" cried Blodwen, blue with rage. "Don't the men look at you no more?"

"Hush, the neighbours will hear," exclaimed Sara. "And she must be hid."

"Only a coffin'll ever hide the same as her," groaned Blodwen.

Sara's husband Evan, with his face like a pious goat, sharpened his two front teeth on his lip. He had never seen the famous sister before. The two men were dominated by their bellicose wives, and looked at her bleakly down their noses. She stood mute and haggard amid the jabbering abuse. It was her punishment and she accepted it. After a while she sank into a chair and bowed her head. Desolate silence was in her broken eyes. She looked like one who bled from some awful secret agony.

"What's come of that elderly brush-manufacturer that kept you?" taunted Sara. "Left you in the gutter, no doubt."

"And the grand foreigner with the diamonds," sneered Blod. "Looking for someone younger now, eh?"

"And the big stockbroker with the gouty feet, ha? And the fifty more! Hussy!" screamed Sara, forgetting the neighbours in her wrath. "She comes back like a bag of bad old 'tatoes."

Evan lifted his two teeth: "Miss Olga, sloppy it is to come back here tail between legs. Foreign to us you are now."

At last Olga whimpered: "I want to come back and rest; I want, I want——" The hot kitchen swirled round her, she flopped off the chair to the floor. They stared at her in anger.

"Damme, ill she is," said Tomos.

"A glass of cold water chuck in her painted face," sang Blod.

"Put her to bed here I shall be obliged to!" wailed Sara. "In my clean sheets! What's the matter with the duffer?"

They had planned to send her flying, after they had unloaded their opinions of her, up to Mary Ann's cottage hidden in the mountains. Mary Ann was the fourth sister and not quite right in the head. She was to keep the trollop where no one would see her. But what did the disgrace want to come back for? Was she greedily after her share of goods left by poor Mam and Dad that she had sent to the grave? She shouldn't have it, the bad one.

"Her fine feathers been plucked proper, plain it is," declared Blod. "Something bad's the matter with her. Best to put her to bed, Sara," she added, gratified that the baggage wouldn't be sullying *her* house, down the valley. "And throw her out soon as she's got her legs back."

It had to be done. But for some days Olga tossed in a fever. No doctor was called, and the presence of the disgrace was kept secret from the district. All the family were great members of Salem, the Baptist chapel on the hill: Blod's husband was even a deacon. Horrible if it was found that the outcast had come back. But more horrible still if she died on them, so that her sinful carcass would have to be buried from Sara's clean house. The provoked Sara nursed her with malign art, not wanting her to die and yet wanting it. She said presently to the wan, thin woman: "Broth you want, and poultry—for out of my house you must get, quick. Haven't you got no money? Only a few shillings in your purse. Coming back here," she began to rage, "and expecting hard-working persons to feed your useless flesh. Ach, you bitch, get better."

"I'm thirsty," Olga whimpered.

"Well," jeered Sara, "think I've got champagne for you?"

Olga then whispered this: "I've got over five hundred pounds in the bank."

Sara laid down the cup of cold water she was bringing and excitedly called downstairs to the kitchen: "Evan, put the kettle on. Poor Olga would like a cup of tea. Fetch nice cakes from the shop and a pot of bloater paste." To Olga she said: "There now, there now, very upset I've been, and my tongue running away with me. But nursing you I've been like a hospital. See, there's better you are! Let me comb your hair and wash your face tidy now."

And she freshened the room. The dusty ewer on the wash-stand she cleaned and filled with water, brought a tablet of scented soap and a new pink towel; she plucked chrysanthemums from the back garden. Then, after feeding the trollop, she took shawl and umbrella and rushed down to her sister Blod's house.

Olga didn't get well, however. Some days she opened her empty eyes and whimpered that she wanted to go to chapel, other days she cowered down in the sheets and wouldn't speak. Something awful was consuming her. But visitors began to fill her room, including cousins and aunts and uncles from right down the valley, who used to declare that never would they go near her—no, not even to attend her funeral. Only Mary Ann, being in her head but fourteen ounces to the pound, was kept out of the news. The first visitor was Blodwen, who brought a tapioca pudding and wheedled:

"Olga, you never seen my son Ivor. Growing up he is now and wants to be a Baptist minister. But there's expensive are the college fees! 'Oh dear me,' I said to him, 'no, Ivor, you must go and work in the pits like your father, for poor as dirt are your hard-working parents.' But wouldn't it be grand for our family, Olga, if we had a chapel minister in it! Our sister Sara was saying it would wipe out a lot, indeed."

Cousin Margiad appeared and said: "Well, Olga! When better you are a visit you must pay me. But very poor my house is—my Willie John hasn't been working for two years. I been praying a long time for a suite of furniture for the parlour, then I could take a school-teacher lodger——"

Sara asked with loving bullying: "Your will you've made, Olga? Better you're getting, but best it is to be on the safe side, and if you go before me I'll bury you first-class, I promise. To go on with, shall I borrow ten quid off you at once? Wages been dropping in the pit," she groaned, "and if I don't find money soon, bums will be knocking on the door and turn us all out."

Aunt Gwen boldly asked for a piano and a pair of tortoise-shell glasses to replace her old pince-nez. Evan asked for a motor-bike and Tomos wanted a pair of greyhounds.

They walked in and out of her room daily, waiting till she was well enough to grant their requests. Sara got her bags up from

the station and was astonished at the silks and satins therein: she tucked them away in her cupboards. Carefully she fed Olga with broths, to keep her a while from Jordan's brink. Not that Olga would eat much. Her great hollow eyes stared emptily, her wrinkling flesh had no more life than tissue paper.

At last Sara cried out in curbed exasperation: "What's the matter with you? Repenting too much you are. Bad you've been, but others in this world have been badder. Tell me now when you're ready for that cheque-book out of your bag."

Olga babbled strangely: "I want to go chapel next Sunday." She wanted to go to Salem, the chapel of her childhood, where she had been pure!

"No, no," said Sara hurriedly, "not yet. Very cold it is there, the heating system's broken down." And downstairs she said to the family: "Is she going daft like our Mary Ann? Wants to go to chapel, if you please, like we do!"

"She started to go wrong," Blod mused, "after Johnny Williams got killed." Johnny had courted Olga long, long ago, till he got caught under a fall of roof in the pit. In the far-away days of her chaste girlhood.

Sara said: "There's a lesson to us all she is! No kick in her now. Falling apart she is like a rotten old cask."

"Yes," Blod began to screech, "but she's been dancing her jigs plenty in London while we stayed by here respectable and working our fingers to the bone."

They resumed their wheedling of the ailing slut: they put pen into her yellow hand and promised visits to chapel when she was better. And before long Blod got two hundred pounds for the education of her son Ivor: the rest of the family, desirous of the glory of a minister therein, agreed she had first claim. But all the others too, except Mary Ann, got their advantages from her repentance, the purchases ranging in size from a suite of furniture down to a hymn-book in soft black leather. Sara paid off the mortgage she had raised on the house: times had been bad in the pits. Then, all this done, she went bustling upstairs one dark evening:

"Get up, Olga. Arranged we have for you to go and stay with Mary Ann. Very healthy up there in the mountains, you will get well quicker. Come now." Olga wept and moaned. But her sister pulled the thin, shrinking body out of the bed and shoved

old garments on it. In the deserted lane behind the house was Evan with his new motor-bike. Olga, shivering and dazed in the winter damp, was strapped to him behind.

Off they went. Up the valley and bumping across a naked mountain by the Old Roman road: down to a vale where there was only a little pit and a couple of farms. Then up the side of a dark mountain, sour in the winter, where sheep coughed. Mary Ann's cottage clung to its side like a leech. The cottage smelt of the dozen cats that she worshipped. She squinted down dubiously at her panting sister as the bike whizzed away, and said: "Drat me, Olga, don't know I do how there's room for you and the cats in my bed. But we'll manage."

Mary Ann was good-hearted: her mind had never opened properly, and it purred like her cats. The damp cottage was small as a hen-house: every day she walked two miles to work at a farm, earning seven shillings a week and milk for the cats. She was strong, chewed shag, and spat on the floor like a man. Olga's past life was vague in her mind.

"Let me sleep," whimpered Olga; "I want to sleep. Then when I'm better we must go to chapel. I want to sing and pray." Her quenched face had gone stiff as a dead sparrow. The cats jumped about her, frisky: some were wild as the mountain wind gnawing at the cottage.

Picking her nose, Mary Ann cogitated. "Where's your husband?" she said at length.

Moaning, Olga wept in misery and repentance: "I've been a bad woman."

"All of us are bad women," said Mary Ann comfortably, "here below." But her mind couldn't stay fixed for long on anything and she said: "Let me see if I can spare a drop of milk from the cats' suppers. There's hungry the little angels are always! Cold in the face you look." She spared a small cup of the bluish mountain milk.

Olga did not get well up in the mountain cottage. And even Mary Ann began to grumble at the tossings and weepings beside her in the bed: the cats were disturbed. Sometimes Olga cried out loud in her agony of spirit. During the day she tried to read the Bible, but there was little strength in her arms to hold up the stout book. One cat there was who became enamoured of her and leapt on her shoulders continually. Her soul began to

gutter out completely. One night she panted for a minister to be brought her.

"Hush," scolded Mary Ann gently, "past ten o'clock it is and Mr. Isaac Rowlands is cosy in bed by the side of his wife with her red hair."

"I want to confess," moaned Olga.

Mary Ann soothed: "Old he is and never climbs mountains. You tell me the confess tomorrow and I will deliver it with his milk on the way home. There now, go to sleep."

The next day Olga, alone in the cottage, wandered out in a daze, her nightshift flapping about her bony body. All around the mountains spread gleaming white and pure as the mountains of Heaven. Crying for God's minister, she was found by a shepherd in the vale and shoved into the policeman's cottage. Delivered back to Mary Ann, in a week she was dead.

Mary Ann, excited, stayed away from the farm and walked over the mountain to Sara, who called a conference. And the purring Mary Ann was told: "Buried from your cottage she must be, quiet by there. A grand coffin will be sent up to you, and one hearse."

"And carriages too," said Mary Ann placidly, "for the mourners." She was proud to have a funeral start from her house.

"No mourners," shouted Sara, who was wearing a fine silk blouse. "She don't deserve it, the life she led. Good people don't sit behind a Jezebel, alive or dead."

The cheapest coffin in Undertaker Jenkins's price-list arrived in Mary Ann's cottage. But she said to the bringer: "The day of the funeral send one carriage up to follow the hearse. For me, and cost to be paid by me, Mary Ann." The funeral day, however, Sara took it into her head to come over, in a tight ginger fur coat, and when she saw the carriage drive up with the hearse and Mary Ann ready in black, she pushed the shocking woman into a chair and hissed: "You want to disgrace the family, you stupid rabbit!" For ten minutes she forced into Mary Ann's mind knowledge of Olga's wickedness: in the end Mary Ann sat with dropped jaw and popping eyes.

So it was that an empty carriage went behind the thin narrow coffin that had no varnish on its wood, no flower on its breast.

The disgrace safely underground, not long afterwards Blod brought up to Sara's house the first letter from her college boy

and, settling her new glasses, read it out to the assembled family. He was doing fine and asked for a new black suit.

"That'll be a day," sighed Sara, "when we hear his first sermon."

Evan lifted his goat's teeth: "Perhaps a comfort it'll be to Olga too, where the mare is, down in the hot."

"Do not speak disrespectful of the dead, Evan," admonished Blod prudently. She folded the letter away into her new leather handbag. "Poor Olga!" she mused. "And she so pretty at one time. I used to brag about her in Sunday-school, long ago. Her face was bright as a daisy and her bosoms like spicy fairy-cakes." She shook her new gay ear-rings. "But too soft she was, too loving."

"Yes, indeed," sighed Sara, who was altering a pink silk petticoat that was too small for her, "and no head for business. A softie like our Mary Ann. Not a diamond ring on her finger, and there's paltry in the bank, when you come to think of all those years!"

Glimpses of the Moon

For some reason or other, Joe always told people that Ellen was his sister. He had settled with her in the foliage-buried cottage since he had left the Army at fifty years of age, having served in Africa and become shrivelled and scant and burnt-looking, though a demon still lurked, half drowsy, in his eye.

Ellen was older; after ten years with him in the cottage she was now sixty-five, her face a mass of curled wrinkles and on her head thousands of diminutive silver curls of wonderful vitality. Her eyes were of the colour and freshness of harebells, and she spoke in a voice that always contained an odd raucous chuckle. Common as any wayside herb she had been, and now with age she possessed a kind of astringent strength that broke often into claps of laughter that could hide the church-bell or into a bawdy observation that her age chastened. Ellen smelt of walnuts, Joe of damp bark; their cottage was only moderately clean, their front garden striped and lurid with clotted masses of flowers. When I remarked on their agile profusion, Ellen said:

"It was the same in my garden in Aldershot."

From where she had hailed. The villagers said she had been a

soldiers' favourite there, and, indeed, her conversation, her vitality, and lack of interest in the village wives pointed to an attractive amount of truth in the gossip.

Joe turned his hand to most jobs about the farms and the village and, fancying himself a gardener, he would come begging for work, though likely as not he would pull up new three-a-shilling shoots for weeds: he would begin: "My sister Ellen, she hollered to me this morning, 'There's no dough in the house, go and ask Mister if he got a job for you.' Poor girl, she's getting on in years and wants one or two comforts now——"

Not that he seemed sentimental or gallant concerning Ellen. He swore at her and blackened her eye on occasion. Screech and roar often sped up with the smoke through their chimney; crockery was smashed. Some old, old nervous conflict found utterance at almost regular intervals.

Sometimes Ellen would look very unsettled: she would stand at the top of the rise behind the cottage and gaze fixedly across the downs to the horizon. Once she noticed me at my window—for their cottage was swaddled in bushes at the end of my garden, looking no bigger than an ornament for a mantelpiece—and called out from the eminence where she was brooding and gazing into the sky:

"Those swallows got wings, but us poor women be buried like beetroot."

"Where do you want to fly, Ellen?" I called.

"Ah!" She looked mysterious. "Ah!" At the moment, her silver hair and crinkled face gave her a look of excessive respectability earned through long blameless years of country labour: her dun flannel skirt swirled blowsily out of her securely laced and still shapely bodice. Descending the slope towards her back door, she added: "Summer coming makes my heart pine for a journey."

That same evening there was a row in the cottage. Ellen's shrieks and Joe's barks seemed of extra intensity; they rose to crescendo and there was a grand final crash of symphonic depth. A minute or two afterwards Joe was banging at my front door.

"Mister, Mister," he yelled impatiently through the letter-box, "my sister Ellen has done a fit and I can't get her round." Opening the door, he added, demonish in the eye and his hands still fisted: "She fell into the fender and must have hit herself in the

fit. You got something to bring her round, sir?" he enquired, a certain amount of fear popping in his voice.

After snatching a flask of brandy I broke with him through the hedge that divided our properties and, treading on young marrows, reached the cottage in a few moments. It seemed struck into awed silence after those thunders. Had Joe killed the sweet Ellen, I wondered, shivering in that silence. I hurried after him into the oil-light of the living-room, and was just in time to see Ellen's venerable head pop up swiftly from behind the settle.

Directly Joe entered she aimed a tea-caddy at him. But from her silver hair dripped a long scarlet stain. The tea-caddy hit him on the chin and brought from him a trooper's oath. He began to rush towards her, then turned snappingly back to me. "Many's the time," he said hoarsely, "that I've been tempted to give her a hiding. If she wasn't my sister——"

"Ah, ah, ah!" mocked Ellen. For some reason she was very dirty, her face wrinkled as if shreds of tobacco were sprinkled over it. She seemed to be in a state of high ecstasy, uttering her throaty exclamation that was neither laugh nor sob, and reared up behind the settle.

"She's bleeding," I murmured.

"Hit herself on the fender," Joe said, scowling in his impotence now. "She must have come to while I was with you."

"That wound should be bathed," I said.

"She's as hard as a mule," he growled.

"Ah, ah, ah!" screamed Ellen. "I'll tell him. I'll tell Mister——"

I took a step or two towards the door. On the other hand, Joe's burning eye boded no good for Ellen, if he were left alone with her. Ellen was charming, she was a good hearty vegetable of the old earth, a product that had a certain sturdy grandeur: I respected her. The flask of brandy in my hand gave me an idea. I turned back.

"What you two want," I said, "is a drop of this."

Ellen stepped out from behind the settle, and Joe immediately went to the cupboard inset beside the fireplace and brought out glasses. Irritating lack of sustenance had probably caused their row, I thought, remembering it was Thursday—a bad moneyless day for Joe. Ellen wiped her hand across her mouth and grinned.

"Wipe yer head," Joe shouted, showing off a bit now. "And yer face is black."

"Mister don't mind," smiled Ellen knowingly. All the same, she went to a broken segment of mirror stuck behind the pipe above the water-tap and swilled her face, uttering strenuous gasps the while. Joe had a look at the wound under the spun silver hair. "Not much," he growled. He licked a finger into a tin of vaseline and rubbed it on the bruise. "Lucky you didn't hit yourself dead," he barked at her.

"Ho, ho, ho!" she bawled, in a different key now, and raising her hands above her head she snapped her fingers, castanet fashion. "I'm not dying yet." She winked at me. The row had obviously exhilarated her.

The brandy mellowed them somewhat. Joe sank into a reverie: I could see he was turning something over in his mind, turning and turning it over. Ellen declared that she was "minded of Old Vic's Jubilee" when she got drunk on brandy at Aldershot, amid the celebrations, falling down and taking with her a big tray full of china Joe raised his small, hard, bullet head and looked at me sombrely. But there was a pathetic appeal in his voice, as if he was asking me to submit judgment:

"Ellen," he said, "wants ter go back to Aldershot to live."

"There," said Ellen loudly, "I c'n see a bit of life. Here I'm like a spud under the ground." She fixed me with her surprisingly vital eyes, that were yet of such a tender and frail blue. "I got a mate there," she added.

"Mate!" cried Joe contemptuously. "Queenie Parrot. She's no mate for a good woman——"

"Queenie's got a new house," Ellen announced.

"She keeps on moving," said Joe, with malevolence. "Got to, I lay."

I turned to Joe. "Don't you like Aldershot?" I asked, imagining that because he was an old soldier he would have some roots in the military town. I surmised that their squabble had been caused by Ellen's desire to move.

"Lousy," he said.

"What's he come here for?" cried Ellen of me, but pointing threateningly at Joe, who began to glower again. "Hiding——"

Shiftily but pathetically, Joe rose and stood with his back to Ellen, obliterating her and facing me. "Mister," he said, "a bit of hot stuff like the brandy goes up straight to her head."

I prepared to go. Ellen tossed off the remainder of her brandy.

She began to sing 'Her golden hair was hanging down her back.' Joe accompanied me to the door.

"Tootle-oo," called Ellen in farewell. "When the blackberries come I'll make you a dozen pots of jam, Mister."

"She's a handful," whispered Joe. "No sense has old age brought her. Sometimes I wish I was back with the Hussars."

But for a week afterwards I heard almost unceasing squabbling, Ellen all raucous threats and Joe yelping with oaths. At last he accosted me on the road and asked despairingly:

"What would you do with her if she was yours, Mister?"

"My sister?" I asked.

He blinked his lizard eyelids, under which dark fire lurked yet. "In a manner of speaking," he answered vaguely.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

He scratched his hair, a harassed scowl on his face. "I been thinking," he said, "I'd let her have a bit of a run in Aldershot. A holiday," he said strictly. "She can jaw over old times with her mate, Queenie Parrot."

"That's all she wants, I expect," I said. "A little holiday."

"If you had a job for me, Mister, to pay her fare——"

So one morning Ellen, voluminously arrayed in a thick and oddly shaped red overcoat—though it was warm summer—a sprigged green cotton gown, well-skewered hat stuck rakishly far back on her silver curls, brilliantly polished boots, and a faded old parasol pushed inside the strap of her plaited straw suitcase, waited for the bus outside her cottage. She waved to me at my gate, a blush of the most delicate pink in either crinkled cheek.

"Good-bye, Mister," she cried, "I'm off to Aldershot."

"Take care of yourself," I called.

"Ah, ah!" she chuckled in her odd raucous way. Her eyes were shining and hard in excitement, their blue deepened into indigo.

"Come back soon," I added, as the bus grunted towards her up the hill.

She grinned widely, lifted her hand to feel if her unaccustomed hat was still on her head, then, advancing to the middle of the road, waved to the bus-driver an enormous bandanna handkerchief like a flag.

The first week of her holiday Joe was quite amiable and bright. Philosophically, he said: "She's getting on, and it'll be her last holiday, most likely, and it's a change to have no ranting woman

shouting at me if I stay in the pub till closing time." Then after the granted seven days had elapsed, he brought me a note from her, his brows sombre. "See what they get up to," he said, "if you let 'em loose for a bit."

Dear Joe (she wrote in a neat and careful hand),

I wish you was here but its no place for you now that the mates of your reggiment are dead or gone somewhere. I met Corpral Cox that used to be Queenie's intended before she married Archie in the old days, he has rheumatics very bad now, but I took him to Queenie's and made them kiss each other and forget and he brought whisky and we had a party, Queenie says I can have her old collapsing harmonnium for eight shillings, see if Mister will give you work and if the buss will take it if I will bring it.

Yours truly, Ellen Banks.

"No word to say when she's coming," he began to storm. "Drinking and parties and knocking round with old soldiers. Harmonium be hanged—when I get hold of her I'll make her squeal better than any harmonium——" The half somnolent demon began to bristle into life. He declared that he was going to order her instant return. Perhaps I smiled dimly, for he finished: "A chap's got to look after his sister when she's got to Ellen's age, and she's a bit on the misbehaving side, like she is——"

"I don't suppose your sister will come to any harm," I tried to soothe him.

Darkly thrusting his fierce glance at me, he muttered: "You don't know her, Mister, like I do."

Another week passed and still there was no sign of a returning Ellen. Joe swore and drank and had bouts of queer hysteria during which his fingers seemed to itch and bristle for action. He kept on complaining to me across the hedge and became extremely malignant concerning the whole female sex. Ellen sent him a postcard the third week; on one side was a picture of some barracks, on the other merely: *This is where the dragoons are now Joe, Yours truly, Ellen Banks.*

"She's going to keep there, the . . . the . . ." he splattered. "That's what it is."

"Well," I said, "why don't you fetch her back?"

He started. Then he scowled. "If she don't want to come

back," he muttered, "I can't make her, can I? I can't put the whip to her, at her age."

"You talk about her," I said at last suspiciously, "as if she was your wife, Joe."

His hollowed and burnt face became inscrutable. I think he took offence. After a moment or two he turned and walked strictly away. The fourth week of Ellen's holiday, however, he came ceremoniously to my door carrying a small box. In the sitting-room he opened the box and drew forth a long old-fashioned gold watch-chain, a heavy silver watch and a cameo brooch.

"Mister," he said earnestly, "how would you like to buy these at bargain prices or have them as pledge on a loan of money?"

"Now, Joe," I said, "what are you after?"

He looked at me furtively, twitching his burnt but strong brows. "I'm going to fetch her," he said in a determined voice.

"Well, your fare won't cost you the price of one of these, Joe."

"I'm going to take a cart," he said.

"A cart!"

"Farmer Jeffries will hire me his cattle-cart and horse for a quid and a half for the day. I don't trust her in trains and buses, Mister. How am I going to get her to the station, to begin with?"

"Well, you've got to get her into the cart."

"I can," he said sombrely, "chase after her with the cart all over Aldershot. I'm going," he continued, a cunning gleam in his eye, "to take the cattle-net with me and tie her inside as if she was a porker."

"Come now, Joe——"

He looked at me then with great solemnity, and suddenly he seemed very pathetic. "I won't get her back at all, Mister, unless I do something the likes of this."

"It looks," I said hesitatingly, "as if your sister *wants* to stay away."

"She isn't my sister!" his dramatic overwrought voice declared ringingly.

"Joe, Joe," I said reprovingly.

He grinned for a moment or two, then as suddenly looked frightened. He asked, subduedly, if I had a thimbleful of brandy I could spare. After tossing off the nip he sat down and whispered across the room:

"I got another wife!"

"Oh?"

"A black one," he added. And again he grinned and again he looked frightened.

"I married her in Africa," he continued, "where it's hot and you see millions of 'em."

I nodded.

"She turned Christian," he said, doleful now, "for my sake. And I married her and left her in the lurch when the regiment left Africa. Yes, Mister," he agreed, "it was a tyke's thing to do, but a young soldier with hot blood in him and bad mates and the drink and those tropics—— Oh, I was worn to a shadow after a bit, and I lost sense of what's right and wrong."

Rather at a loss, I shook my head.

"You and me," he went on appealingly, "been mates almost, and you being fond of Ellen, I can tell you this, that no one knows hereabouts. . . . You see, after the regiment was in Aldershot for a bit, them missionaries wrote to the Colonel about my case, and I did a bunk, thinking I'd be put in clink or else sent back to Africa, or perhaps have a black woman on my hands in Aldershot and everybody's laugh. And Ellen followed me after a bit—I used to run about with her in Aldershot. She used to be fond of the Dragoons," he added parenthetically, "but I took her off 'em, after a fight or two. I was in the Hussars."

I poured him some more brandy.

"I durst not marry Ellen, and setting up here in a proper cottage, it was cleaner to say we was brother and sister," he continued. "Folks don't give you work in their gardens if they think you're living loose with a dame." He began to look quite cross and irritable. "A worrying time it's been for me, but Ellen, she don't care and chews the rag about my 'black pudding,' as she calls her, and asks if we was both cannibals and tried to eat each other after we got married."

He seemed to wait for comment, fixing me with his smouldering eye. "Oh well," I said, "it happened so long ago, I expect it's all forgotten now in Aldershot, so no doubt it will be safe for you to go there."

"That's what I'm wondering, but I know if I don't fetch Ellen, she'll slip back to her old ways there."

I suppose I must have looked at him enquiringly. He gave a

quick and shifty glance past me, then looked up again with a deliberately stolid mien.

"The drink it is that's her trouble," he said.

"But she can't afford to drink much," I said defendingly. The phrase about revisiting the glimpses of the moon was passing through my head. "I expect she's just enjoying herself seeing her old friends," I added. "Tea-parties and such-like, Joe."

"You don't know Queenie Parrot, Mister," he growled. "She's one of those dames that never grow old. Dragoons, Hussars and Lancers, they all know Queenie down in Aldershot. She's no mate for my Ellen."

However, he gave her still another week's grace. And still no intimation of her return arrived. On Saturday morning he drove past my cottage in one of those carts in which the smaller cattle are taken to market. A fixed scowl was on his face, and one could see he had a professional handling of a horse. It was twenty miles to Aldershot. He stood up in the cart, alert and straight, and made one think of a Roman soldier in a chariot: the horse was young and brisk.

The cart had not returned at midnight. I was preparing to go to bed half an hour later, closing *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, when I heard the wheels crunch down the hill. Lamp in hand I went to the door.

"Mister," called Joe out of the blackness, "give us a hand, for the love of God."

Out in the lane he was turning the light of one of the cart-lamps on the inside of the cart. Ellen lay fast asleep on the straw-covered floor. A net was stretched over the top of the cart. Beside Ellen lay a couple of empty beer-bottles.

"Oh, Mister," lamented Joe, "I had to give her them flagons to keep her quiet, though she was under the influence when I found her."

He began to loosen the net. He seemed to be snorting with exhaustion. Ellen lay in disorder; she looked very far gone into slumber. Nevertheless, the dignity of age prevented her from looking laughable. Joe took her shoulders, I her feet, and we hoisted her into the cottage without her blinking an eyelid. There was a look of gentle satisfaction round her nose and mouth. We laid her on the settle.

"I told you," panted Joe, "I wouldn't get her back unless I

netted her inside a cart. There she was enjoying herself like a lady, drinking port and stout mixed together, in Queenie Parrot's house along with a lot of riff-raff. Quite a party, it was, I stayed for a bit till Ellen took so much she lay on her back like a flat-fish." He glistened with kindling triumph. "I had paid a boy to look after the hoss outside the house, and there it was all ready when I heaved her up and took her out, what was my rightful belonging, though that Queenie Parrot screamed like mad." The triumph shot into his eyes. "I galloped through Aldershot like I was back in the Hussars and with my old hoss Sparkle."

He was swelling his chest extravagantly, warrior-like. "And didn't she wake up and shout?" I asked.

"Not till we got outside Aldershot. Then she began to holler, crying and scratching. So I had to buy her the flagons and afterwards she went to sleep again."

Ellen, lying on the settle, looked quite cosy now. There was a youthful bloom on her wrinkled face, like the bright pink of a wild rose, and her lips pouted. The mass of silver curls shone with a lively gleam. Joe, his hands on his hips, looked at her lordlily. Then he lowered his voice to an intimate whisper:

"She looks a pretty little dame lying there, don't she, Mister? Innocent-like and what men lay down their lives for. A pity they're not always like that." And going back to the lane to take away the horse and cart, he added, with satisfaction: "A chap's got to act smart if he wants to keep 'em, he's got to act smart . . ."

A Human Condition

Having done the errand at the Post Office, which he had timed with a beautiful precision that he imagined completely hoodwinked those left at home, Mr. Arnold crossed the Market Square just as the doors of the Spreadeagle inn were opened.

This morning he was in lamentable condition. He felt he would never get through the day without aid. Never, never, never. Deep inside him was a curious dead sensation of which he was frightened. It lay in the pit of his stomach like some coiled serpent

fast asleep, and he was fearful that at any moment the thing would waken and writhe up in unholy destructive fury. And ultimately *he* would be destroyed. Not his critics, today collected in dark possession of his home.

He sailed into the pub with his ample, slightly rolling strut, a man of substance handsomely ripe of body and face, his attire as conservative as a psalm to godliness; no one could say Mr. Arnold neglected his person. Of the town's few pubs the Spreadeagle was his favourite haunt. It was cosily shut in on itself and dark with shadows; it had low, black-beamed ceilings, copper gleams, honest smells, and morose windows hostile to light. In the hall a torpid spaniel bitch looked at him with the heavily drooping eyes of a *passée* actress; she knew Mr. Arnold, and there was no necessity for even a languid wag of her tail. Always the first customer, he stepped into the bar parlour with his usual opening-time briskness. But Mrs. Watson, polishing glasses behind the bar, looked at him with a start. "Well!" she seemed about to exclaim, but only pursed her lips.

"A whisky," he said; "a double."

"A double?" Something was concealed in her tone.

"Yes, for God's sake." The false briskness was suddenly deflated. "And pour another for me while you're about it."

"*No*, Mr. Arnold," she said, flat; "no. Not *two* doubles. . . . It isn't right," she bridled; "not today. Good heavens! Don't forget you've got to be there sober at two o'clock. *No*, Mr. Arnold."

"Hell!" he muttered. He looked over his shoulder with child-blue eyes round in fear. "Where's Alec?" A man would understand, must surely understand, what that day really meant. Women were incalculable in the domain of the affections, could run so drastically from the extremes of loving solicitude to the bleakest savagery. "Where's Alec?" he peered.

"Gone to London for the day," his wife said. "Gone to buy me a budgerigar."

"Gone to London," he mumbled, preoccupied.

"They can chirp ever so sweet," she said tightly, "and intelligent, my goodness!—my sister had one that would hop on the table when she was making cake and stone the raisins for her."

"What?" He started from his glassy preoccupation.

"The budgerigar she had. With its beak. Intelligent, my stars!

. . . I've known many a human being," she added forbiddingly, "that could do with their brains and feelings."

Both the Malt Shovel and the Bleeding Horse, which were on his way home, were only beer houses. No licence for spirits. But there was plenty of time. He would climb to Cuckoo Ridge, up to the Self Defence. Its landlord, whose wife had been in an asylum for years, would understand. There was the Unicorn too, nearer, but repellent with its horrible modern cocktail bar, its café look, and its dirty waiters.

Mrs. Watson, solicited with flattery and whining, allowed him a single whisky more. She asked him what would be said in the town if she allowed him to have all he wanted on that morning of all mornings. He left the house with dignity, part of him preoccupied with feeling offended, but the greater part obeying a huge desolate urge to complete the scarcely begun journey into that powerful state where he would feel secure, a captain of his fate, if a melancholy one. He had never been able to take to drinking at home. Besides, Susan never encouraged it. Never a bottle of whisky in the house.

In the shopping street, those people who knew Mr. Arnold—and they were many, for by now he was a local celebrity—looked at him with their cheerfulness, due to the brilliant day, wiped momentarily from their faces. But he encouraged no one to pass a few words with him; time must not be wasted. He took a side turning and began to climb among loaded apple and pear trees spread over garden walls. The whole fragrantly warm little town was fat with sunlight, fruit, and flowers. Mr. Arnold began to pant and lean on his expensive malacca stick.

Above, on the bright emerald slopes with their small well-groomed fields, cows stood like shiny china ornaments. The short local train from London puffed a plume of snowy cotton-wool. It was toy countryside, and Mr. Arnold felt obliged to admire its prettiness; it had been Susan's idea to live here on his retirement from his highly successful career in the City lanes near Tower Bridge, where scores of important man knew him. He liked to feel that London was still near, he liked to see, on Sundays and Bank Holidays, clumps of pallid cockney youths and girls in cycling knickers dotting those slopes like mushrooms. The high air, clear as mineral waters, was supposed to be good for one. Susan said it eased her chest, and she had become a leading voice

in the Women's Institute. . . . Ah, Susan, Susan! Her husband panted in sore distress, climbing.

On Cuckoo Ridge the landlord of the Self Defence greeted him, after a slight pause, courteously. But Mr. Arnold saw at once that he was in the know. Rapidly he asked for a second double. The landlord, a stout, placid man in braces, looked at him. Perhaps he saw a man in agony of spirit; he served the drink. Mr. Arnold thought he felt deep sympathy flowing from this man whose own wife had been shut away from him for several years already. He asked for a third double.

The landlord mournfully shook his head. "Best not, Mr. Arnold."

"One more," panted Mr. Arnold. "Only one. I've got a day in front of me." In the pit of his stomach was a stirring of fear, as if the sleeping coil shuddered. "Never be able to face it," he whimpered.

The landlord shook his head in slow, heavy decision. "There's the circumstances to consider," he said.

Mr. Arnold attempted a hollow truculence. "My money's as good as anyone's——"

"Now, sir," said the landlord distantly, "best be on your way." And, solemnly: "You've got a job to do, Mr. Arnold."

Mr. Arnold walked out with deliberate steadiness. A clock had struck twelve-thirty. It would have to be the Unicorn, and time was pressing now. Actually he had already taken his morning allowance, but today . . . today. . . . He descended from the Ridge with a careful step, crossed the watercress beds into the London road, and looked sourly at the gimcrack modern façade of the Unicorn, a rebuilt house done up for motoring whipper-snappers and their silly grinning dolls. He went in like an aggressive magistrate with power to deprive the place of its licence. But he cast himself into a bony scarlet-and-nickel chair with a groan, wiping his brow. A white presence slid up to his chair.

"Double whisky," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Arnold," said the waiter.

He cocked up his eye sharply. Known here too! In a blurred way, the grave young face looking down at him was familiar. Ha, it was Henry, who used to come with his father to do the garden! Quickly Mr. Arnold assumed the censorious glare of a boss of substance. "And mind it's genuine Scotch, Henry," he said. He

did not like the boy's solicitous look as he withdrew to the blonde cinema star serving behind the jazzy zigzagged corner counter. He took out his big presentation gold watch and looked at it importantly. Was there a pausing at the bar, a whispering? Surely he, who had been a guest at Lord Mayors' banquets in the Mansion House, was not going to be dictated to in a shoddy hole like this? Henry brought the double. "Get me another, my boy," Mr. Arnold said. Henry hesitated, but withdrew; came back— "Sir," he said awkwardly, "sir, there's no more except this single. Our supplies haven't arrived; they'll be here by tonight."

Was everybody his enemy that day? Was there a plot against him? After that long walk, to be allowed only this! Mr. Arnold pushed back his chair, made an effort to collect his forces for dire protest. But somehow—was it because of guilt or the heat?— they would not assemble. He could only gaze fixedly at Henry in silent reproach, anger, and, finally, entreaty. "Very sorry, sir," mumbled Henry from far away. "Can I call up the garage for a taxi, sir?"

"A taxi? Certainly not." He swallowed the single, tipped lavishly, rose like an offended emperor, sat down, and rose again, thunderous yet dignified.

"Your stick, Mr. Arnold." Henry handed it.

He needed it now. Outside, his eyes could focus neither on the shifting ground nor the burning pansy-coloured sky. The soft amateur hills ran into each other like blobs of water-colours imperfectly handled. But he would walk, he would walk. Anything rather than be in the house before it was quite essential. Not with *them* there. . . . The town hall clock, its notes gently without chiding, struck the quarter after one. Yet those chimes were like knells bringing grief. Grief, grief. A sensation of burning grief, physical and staggering, pierced him. He sat gasping on the low roadside wall. The day was no longer brilliant, crackling with sun. The desolation of what awaited his presence swept down on him in gusts of black depression. God above, he could never face it. Not without——. He rose with remarkable celerity.

Fool, fool! Why had he forgotten the Adam and Eve? He walked rapidly, a man refreshed, stick striking the road almost evenly. . . . But outside the Adam and Eve, a sixteenth-century house sagging in a dark medieval alley hidden in the town, he paused to arrange himself into the aspect of a man with a grip on

himself, and he rolled into the pub with a lordly assurance.

The poky, cool bar parlour was deserted except for a cat enormously asleep on the counter. Mr. Arnold called: "Hey! Customer here!" He banged the counter with his stick. No one appeared. Not a sound shifted into the stagnant air. He gave the cat a sharp dig with his stick; it did not stir or open an eye. He shouted, thumped the counter. A dead petal of plaster fell from the ceiling. But no one came. The silence closed impervious over his shouts of anguish. No one passed in the shadowed alley outside. His stick rang frenziedly on the counter. He had the feeling he was in a dream in which a ghostly, senseless frustration dogs one's every move. The cat slept. The hands of a dusty old clock remained neatly and for ever together at twelve o'clock. The bottles on the shelves looked as if they were never opened. He jabbed at the cat again; it did not move out of its primeval sleep.

Mr. Arnold whimpered. He lurched over to the door in the crooked bellied-out wall and lifted the old-fashioned latch. But the door wouldn't open. Had it been locked behind him? Was he being imprisoned? "Who's there?" he screamed, banging his stick furiously against the rickety panel. The after-silence did not budge. He tore madly at the latch. Suddenly the door flew open; it had jammed in the ancient frame. Raging, Mr. Arnold stamped down the passage, threw back another door.

A dazzle of pink interior light struck into his eyes. He stepped into a hot living-room with a huge window and an opened door leading to a garden blazing with snapdragons, roses, and hollyhocks. A blue-gowned woman, immensely fat, was pegging out washing over the gush of flowers. Mr. Arnold all but sobbed with relief. "Customer!" he yelled.

"Be there in a minute," she called affably. "Its a beautiful drying day."

"Got a train to catch," he bellowed. "I want a double Scotch."

"All right, all right." Smooth and brown-faced as an egg, and with a dewlap of Turkish chins, she indolently left her basket, saying: "No need to be crotchety. Where there's one train there's another; they've got the extra summer service now to London. I'm going up myself on Thursday; my daughter's going to be examined. . . . Why, it's Mr. Arnold!" She paused, in pastoral caution. "Are they taking her by train, then? I didn't know." As if this settled her doubt, she hurried into the bar.

Mr. Arnold said nothing. He drank the double in two gulps and asked for another, saying quickly: "Then I've got to hurry." The woman talked of her daughter with soft, unstressed tact. He paused uncertainly after the second double.

"No, Mr. Arnold," she decided for him, "I can't give you any more."

"Mrs. Busby," he said grandly, grasping his stick as for a march, "I know when to stop."

"Gents always do." She nodded approval. "God bless you."

Now he felt translated into the desired sphere, where he could survey his kingdom without lamentations. Power radiated in him. As in the old days of his office fame, he could have settled a ledger page of complicated figures in a twinkling. And that menacing dead weight in the pit of his stomach had vanished. He felt himself walking erect and proud through the luncheon-quiet town. He required no one's compassion. This heady brilliance lasted him all the way home. And he would not be late; a fixed stare at his watch testified to that. He congratulated himself on the efficient way he had handled his time. *They* would not be able to rebuke him for being late, on this day of all days.

Yet sight of his well-kept villa at the edge of the town struck a note in his soul like a buried knell. The garden, green-lawned and arched with trellises of roses, was trim beyond reproach—the packet he spent on it every year! And the house was cleanly white as a wedding cake. But quite suddenly now he felt that its walls and contents, its deeds and insurance policies, no longer interested or concerned him. At the gate he paused in panic. Was this the first faint rising of the horror he thought was obliterated from his being? . . . But almost at once this fear became blurred. His stick decisively tapping the crazy paving, he rolled up under the arches of roses with an air of having unfortunate business to transact.

The white-porched door was wide open. He entered bustlingly. Out of the drawing-room came Miriam, his elder sister-in-law; the woman in charge now, and his enemy. She looked at him and shrank. "We waited lunch as long as we could," she said, in her hard, gritty way. Her husband hovered behind her, thick horn glasses observant. "I wanted George to go into the town and look for you——" she said hopelessly.

"Food!" Mr. Arnold said, in high rebuke. "You didn't expect me to eat lunch *today*!"

They all advanced out of the drawing-room into the hall, looking at him sideways. Ellen, the younger sister-in-law, and her husband, the dentist's assistant; their grown-up daughter; and Miriam's adolescent son. Alert but careful, visitors and yet that day not visitors, they were all dressed up and important, as if they were going to be photographed. Mr. Arnold stretched his hat to a peg on the stand but miscalculated its position—"Cursed thing," he remarked solemnly to the fallen hat. He sat heavily in the hard oak hall chair and wiped his brow. "In good time," he observed. "Five minutes yet. . . . What . . . what you all standing there for?" He jerked up his head despotically. He saw tears streaming down Ellen's face before she turned and, hurrying into the drawing-room, moaned: "I shall be ashamed to go. He's ruined the day. Something must be done. Henry—— " she motioned to her husband. But Miriam, stark and glaring, stood like judgment.

"They're coming," called her son, who had gone to the open door and was keeping a watch on the lane.

"Two o'clock!" said Mr. Arnold in a solemn but strangely forlorn voice. "Two o'clock!" Still collapsed in the chair, he groaned; his glassy eyes rolled, then stonily looked forth like tortoise eyes.

Henry and Ellen came back and whispered to Miriam's husband; they advanced briskly to Mr. Arnold. "Look, old boy," George attempted male-understanding. "We think you'd better not go with us. We will see to everything. Take it easy and have a rest." Enticingly he laid his hand under Mr. Arnold's armpit, while Henry gripped the other arm. "They're here; come upstairs," he coaxed. The two sisters watched in pale, angry withdrawal.

Mr. Arnold, shaking away the possessive hands, rose from the chair tremendously. "What!" he panted. "Better not go!" Masterfully he drew himself up. "Me! *Me!*"

"*You are drunk*," pronounced Miriam in icy rage. "You are blind drunk. It's shameful." Ellen wilted with a bitter sob against the wall.

Mr. Arnold's eyes bulged. Their devilish shine enveloped Miriam with a terrible contempt, restrained for many years.

"This," said Mr. Arnold, "*this* is no time for insults. The pack of you can clear out now if you like. *I will go alone,*" he said defiantly.

"Now look here——" George began, conciliatory but aghast.

At that moment four men loomed at the open doorway. Four tall men, sleek and black-garbed, leanly efficient of aspect. With everyone in the hall black-clothed, too, the fair summer day seemed turned to shadow. The drawing-room clock struck two dainty *pings*. At the sound the four men entered, admirably prompt. There was something purifying in their sinewy impersonality. "Upstairs," Mr. Arnold, steady as a stout column, told them, "in the back room." The black quartet filed up the staircase. Out of the kitchen came Mrs. Wills, her apron removed, and stood apart with her kind cook's fist under an eye.

"Have you decided to risk it?" Henry muttered to the women, while Mr. Arnold reached down with glacial but careful dignity for his black hat. There was whispering, a furtive watching of him.

Down the staircase came the four men with the coffin tilted on their shoulders. The seven mourners stood back. Mr. Arnold's face was stonily set again. He followed the quartet out with a stern and stiff gait. George and Henry, watchful, went close behind him. After them, in ceremonious orderliness, the others. But the two sisters, under their fashionably crisp black hats bought especially for the journey, crept forward with heads bowed very low, asking pardon of the world for this disgrace.

Mr. Arnold negotiated half the length of the crazy paving with masterful ease. Then he began to sway. A hand grasped the trellis of an arch, and a shower of pink and white petals fell on his head and shoulders; his hat dropped out of his hand. The two men took his elbows, and now he submitted to their aid. Ellen sobbed anew; and Miriam moaned: "We can only hope people will think it's grief." Then she hissed frantically: "Brush those petals off him, George; he looks as if he's getting married."

The hearse contained its burden, the three limousines behind were elegant. "Four wreaths," said the supported Mr. Arnold, hanging out his head like a bull. While the impersonal mutes went back to the house, the mourners disposed themselves in the cars. Though the two sisters had planned to occupy the first car with Mr. Arnold, their husbands went in with him instead. "There, take it easy, old boy," said George, over-friendly now.

Mr. Arnold was well off and a triumphant example of industrious rectitude in the City.

"Eh? . . . eh?" said Mr. Arnold vacantly. And, sunk between the two men into luxurious cushions, he straightway went into a doze. The car began its two-mile journey with a silent, soft glide.

"We mustn't let him go right off," Henry worried. "Hey! Mr. Arnold, hey!"

Mr. Arnold opened his eyes ferociously. "The best wife a man ever had," he groaned. "Susan, Susan!" he called wildly. The driver turned his head for a moment. "Ha, shameful, am I! . . . That woman hasn't got the intelligence of a . . . of a . . . budgerigar! And no more Christian feeling than a trout. Who'd have thought she and Susan were sisters! . . . And that other one," he grunted, "what's her name . . . Ellen, always grizzling and telling Susan she was hard up and her husband kept her short —pah! . . . A depressing lot," summed up Mr. Arnold, staring rigidly into space. Then again he called in loud anguish: "Susan, Susan, what will I do now?"

Beads of perspiration stood on Henry's forehead. But George remained cool; despite the abuse of his wife, he even sounded affectionate—"Never mind, old chap," he comforted the bereaved, "it'll be over soon. But keep awake, don't let down the whole family."

"What family?" asked Mr. Arnold. "Got none." And, sunk down and torpid, he seemed a secret being gathered eternally into loneliness. The two other men glanced at each other. "Susan," whispered Mr. Arnold, chin on chest, "Susan . . . God above!" he wailed again, "what will I do now?" They were going through the full shopping street; people stopped to look, with arrested eyes. "The only one of the bunch to keep her sweetness," muttered Mr. Arnold. "Coming here in their showy hats!" he chuckled. "But they couldn't make a man feel proud like Susan did. That time I took her to the Mansion House banquet——" But wild grief engulfed him anew. "Susan, Susan," he called, "what'll I do now?"

"Here, pull yourself together," Henry protested sharply at last, and, perhaps feeling Mr. Arnold had gone far enough in insults, "We're coming to the cemetery."

Mr. Arnold heaved into physical alertness for the ordeal. In a minute or two the car slid to a delicate standstill. Inside the

cemetery gates was a group of half-a-dozen women, representatives of the institute for which Susan had organised many an event. Out of the lodge came the surpliced vicar, prayer-book in hand. Henry got out first and, red-faced, offered a hand to Mr. Arnold, who ignored it and alighted without mishap. But for an awful moment the widower's legs seemed boneless. Then he drew himself up nobly, stood rock-like in ruminative strength, while the coffin was drawn out and borne ahead.

The two sisters stood in helplessness, hiding their faces, but peering like rabbits. The procession began to form. The vicar turned the pages of his book in mild abstraction. George and Henry sidled up beside Mr. Arnold. "I'll walk alone," hissed Mr. Arnold, and he reminded them fiercely that Miriam and Ellen were entitled to follow immediately behind him. He insisted on that being arranged. The institute women, who seemed unaware of anything unusual, took their places in the rear. The cortège moved.

The cemetery was cut out of a steepish slope, and the newly acquired section was at the top. It was quite a climb for elderly mourners; a discussion had waged in the local paper about the lack of foresight in not making a carriage road through the place. Mr. Arnold, close behind the coffin and without his well-known stick, negotiated the climb with an occasional lapsing of his knees, a straightening of his back, or a rigid turning and jerking of his head, like a man doing physical exercises. But he achieved it victoriously. Behind him Ellen wept and Miriam stared in blank fear.

It was not until all were assembled before the graveside and the service had begun that Mr. Arnold began to display signs of collapse. He vaguely swayed; his head lolled. George and Henry took a step nearer him. The abstract vicar droned unseeing; the institute women remained tactful behind the chief mourners. The attendants took up the roped coffin; it disappeared; a handful of earth was thrown in after it. Presently the vicar's voice stopped. George and Henry took Mr. Arnold's elbows to assist him for the last look.

"Leave me alone," Mr. Arnold muttered, drawing his elbows angrily away. What had these to do with him! He advanced with renewed dignity to the brink of the grave. Looked in as if into an abyss of black tremendous loneliness. Stood there staring down in

concentrated intentness, prolonged, fascinated. The vicar waited in faint surprise at the mourner's lengthy scrutiny.

George and Henry darted forward. Too late. While a single hysterical woman's cry shot up, Mr. Arnold shot down, falling clumsily, arms flapping out, his disappearing face looking briefly astonished, the mouth wide open and showing all his artificial teeth. There was a moment's hesitation of unbelieving dismay. Then the bustling began. Mr. Arnold lay down there on his stomach across the coffin. An upper denture gleamed out in the clay beside him.

"I knew it," said Miriam, later, "I felt it in my bones when you two allowed him to walk alone to the graveside. Thank heaven *we* don't live here." They were in the villa in conference. Mr. Arnold had been taken to the county hospital with a fractured leg.

He stayed there two months. The first patient to be received out of a grave, he was the talk and pet of the hospital; as the night sister remarked: "He must have been a devoted husband to throw himself into his wife's grave like that! I've never known a man grieve so much. How he calls out in the night for his Susan!" . . . Cantankerous at first, he became astonishingly meek. The doctor allowed him a certain amount of whisky. The night sister, perhaps because she was shortly due for retirement, secretly allowed him a little more. She took quite a fancy to him, and some months later, thinking he had detected in her a flavour of Susan's character, Mr. Arnold married her.

Price of a Wedding Ring

BIG, GENEROUS AND GAILY DRESSED, Dinah Cockles was as free with herself as with the tough little sea-vermin she sold off a cart twice a week, fresh in their shells and the sharp tang of their home on them, and indeed on her. The colliers' wives would crowd round and Dinah, usually chuckling some bawdiness or other, would fill their kitchen bowls generously for a few pence, never bothering to use the pint measure. Similarly in her own

life she never measured things out. It was said that in her younger days she had been a sailors' pleasure in Cardiff docks and (the romantic-minded added) had retired to the mining valleys because one particular mariner had laid waste to her over-generous heart. She looked only about forty now, as far as could be judged. But, at this time, there was something immortal about her. She had a touch of the undying pagan, flowering dingy but dauntless in an unsuitable time.

She lived in a pretty rambling old hut up by the railway near the pits, her pony stabled in a patch of vigorous garden around. In addition to the cockles she took in washing, dealt in old clothes, sold blocks of wood sawn by herself, bunches of primroses gathered in her travels, blackberries, mushrooms and other seasonal things. Her cart often was of festive aspect, like a cart in Theocritus. She rarely lacked money for drink or for the series of battered rapscallions she took under her wing. But these protégés, wandering men without roots, never stayed long with her. When wearied of them (after a few months) she chucked them out and they just disappeared without fuss. Dinah, a baleful smile on her large juicy mouth, would chuckle to the housewives: "An old maid I am again; got any men you don't want?" Just as, blowing her toy cornet in the streets, she would shout: "Any old waistcoats and drawers to sell?"

Despite her drunkenness, amorousness and salt tongue, she offended few. Even the chapels were silent about her, no doubt recognising—wrongly, as it happened—something irremediable in her. Her complete lack of parsimony shed a happy glow over all her doings. Even over a displeasing Saturday-night habit of hers. For this night she favoured a pub at the bottom of the steep hill. After closing-time she climbed the hill with panting but jocose insults against its steepness, and when at the summit, the rows of houses spread fan-wise beneath her, she would commit a nuisance in the middle of the road. Her loud clap of laughter seemed to crash against the mountains. People said she could be heard at this from the bottom of the hill.

On Sundays, though never an attendant at chapel, Dinah was meek as a wallflower. She never did business of any kind, wore a white apron and was highly pleased if any children—taboo though she really was—visited her for a glass of the small beer she brewed from nettles. She would call us in if we, shy and

wary as swallows, skimmed about the domain of her hut in play. I enjoyed a glass of her small beer several times. The man of the moment, blear-eyed, unshaven and pondering like an owl—they always had something unlit about them—might be lolling on a kind of bed-chair stuffed gigantically with coloured old rags like some barbaric throne. I remember one of them showing me a big scar on his leg, caused, he said, in America by a Red Indian's poisoned arrow.

"Don't tell lies to children," Dinah said indignantly. "You never been further than Swansea all your life."

"I seen Niagara Falls!" the man bragged, but whiningly.

"Aye, in a penny lantern show," she said, concise in her respect for truth.

She always showed me her two treasures—a primitive African wood-carving of a man (which she kept under the cover of a disused sewing-machine) and an albatross's egg. Dinah's eyes were dark as damsons, and in those days her voice suggested to me all kinds of purply and starry mysteries, like night. I forgot to mention that she sold herbs. Her trade was extensive and, it was whispered, peculiar. But for the drink and the men she could have been quite decently off. But she was no business woman.

Her metamorphosis into a new Dinah was achieved not by religion, illness, world economic troubles or war, but by a man. At the age of fifty or so Dinah Cockles fell with a crash into love. That is, she fell completely and wallowingly—her nature being an all-out one—under the domination of a man—*she*! There must have been something in that story of a careless sailor who, in her salad days, had rent her heart.

The new doom was an undersized little rodent of a man going by the name of Job the Grinder. He trundled a knife-sharpening machine round the streets, grinding with a glittering-eyed intensity the cutlery brought out to him, a man with the sharp-nosed exclusive concentration of a rat. With his grimy lean chops and his swift but slinking step he looked like something that dwelt in dark holes. Yet he was known to be respectable and to have a post-office savings account.

Dinah shakily informed a pub crony that the Grinder had told her he could set her up for life—meaning they could make a fortune together.

"*You* 'ont make a fortune," the crony said, "and that Job the Grinder's no 'andsome bit of nature for you, Dinah."

Dinah gurgled. "But a way he's got; I can tell. When he's looking at me it's just like a big fire warming up the old flue."

She was overcome with respect for him when he insisted on marrying her properly, in a chapel. For a year or so they lived in the hut. But her very first week as a wife had brought an ominous change in Dinah. For the first time in her life she used the pint measure on the cockle cart, giving exact value and no more. Her manner was of one who peers over her shoulder in fright. The obliteration of her flamboyant bawdiness was more gradual, and she continued to go to the pubs for some time, for it would be a mighty catastrophe indeed that could hold such an old soaker back.

"Do that Grinder count the cockles out to you one by one?" Mrs. Evans, 36 Forest Row, complained. "Well, Dinah, surprised at you I am. There's a paltry lot for sixpence!"

"Job," said Dinah broodingly, "do talk about the post-office bank in the middle of the night."

"Good gracious," exclaimed the customer, "there's awful for you! Like a man swearing in chapel it must be."

Then the prices of the herbs and the blocks of wood went up. Even worse was the apologetic hangdog manner that Dinah began to assume. Behind all her doings Job the Grinder's black shadow began to loom. Her cart ceased to be loaded with cheap bunches of flowers; Job said that the flower-trade was too unreliable, and instead he made her sell paraffin oil. Also he ordered her to hurry and not to gossip in the streets; one of his sayings was: "A gossip is a shilling lost in profit."

"Well, Dinah," Mrs. Roberts, 18 Bryn Terrace, remarked, "next time a form to fill in he'll be giving us every time we want a pint of cockles. On the Council he ought to be."

As someone said about this new Dinah: "It's because she's never had a husband before, only men."

Her strange submission to the creed of profit could only be explained by a complete doting on the Grinder. But worse was to come. Not only did they move from the picturesque hut and take a slice of one of the long ugly rows of houses like everybody else, but he made her comb the tips of rubble about the colliery for sackloads of stray coal. These she would heave on

her back and hawk through the back-lanes. So that she got grubby, unkempt and with a beast-of-burden look. Such is love. After moving to the house she also ceased to wear bright blouses and garish scarves. And one Sunday, in clothes of sombre hue, she walked by his side into a chapel. Yes, as a proper acceptable member. Then, last achievement of the Grinder, there was the drink, though in this she struggled against him for about three years. But there arrived a Saturday night when no pub saw her. She did not appear in the streets the whole of the following week; the Grinder said she was not well.

"One thing about it, anyhow," someone remarked; "the top of the hill will be dryer. An ill wind it is . . ."

It was from this time that a real and deep decline set in on Dinah Cockles. I met her once as, a bag of coal on a wall, she stood resting against it with a vaguely bewildered look. She sagged, her black cheeks were hollow, and her once-bright hair hung dank and gritty. There was no longer any sparkling dance in her damson eyes. Love still had her fast. For when Job was around her cart on cockle days she would still look at him with that submissive and shameless outpouring with which women in her state can drench men, often with refreshing effect.

She went downhill, for all the tidy lace curtains of the new house, the chapel, the teetotalism and the post-office savings. The old pagan spring in her dried up and the propriety of her tongue was like a page in the parish magazine. Her wedded life lasted five years. To the last she was apologetic when measuring the strict pint of cockles.

"How much you got in the post-office now, Dinah?" a customer grumbled.

"The Grinder do do all that," she replied, asking forgiveness in her voice.

She died of sobriety and bronchitis one November when the wind whipped icily round the coal tips. Her coffin plate declared she was sixty. It must be said that Job the Grinder buried her tidily, taking three pounds out of the post-office for a new black suit. His lean, sharp face was quite dismal just before the funeral, and he grieved to the mourners:

"Met her too late I did. A tough little worker she was, and if I had married her twenty years earlier, from a mansion she'd be buried today." His thin rat's whiskers sensitively quivering

in the unspoken criticism around him, he added righteously: "Gone above as a respectable member of society she has, whatever."

But as a neighbour remarked afterwards: "He pushed her big heart into a pint measure and it burst." More to the point was the comment of Mrs. Jenkins, 48 Tip Terrace, who was notorious for her regular Saturday-night thrashing of her drunken husband: "Choked she was by a wedding ring."

Nightgown

I

SHE HAD MARRIED WALT after a summer courtship during which they had walked together in a silence like aversion.

Coming of a family of colliers, too, the smell of the hulking young man tramping to her when she stepped out of an evening was the sole smell of men. He would have the faintly scowling look which presently she, too, acquired. He half resented having to go about this business, but still his feet impelled him to her street corner and made him wait until, closed-faced and glancing sideways threateningly, she came out of her father's house. They walked wordless on the grit beside the railway track, his mouth open as though in a perpetual yawn. For courting she had always worn a new lilac dress out of a proper draper's shop. This dress was her last fling in that line.

She got married in it, and they took one of the seven-and-sixpenny slices of the long blocks of concreted stone whipping round a slope and called Bryn Hyfryd—that is, Pleasant Hill. Like her father, Walt was a pub collier, not chapel.

The big sons had arrived with unchanged regularity, each of the same heavy poundage. When the sex of the fifth was told her, she turned her face sullenly to the wall and did not look at him for some time. And he was her last. She was to have no companionable daughter after all, to dote on when the men were in the pit. As the sons grew, the house became so obstreperously male that she began to lose nearly all feminine attributes and was apt to wear a man's cap and her sons' shoes, socks, and mufflers to

run out to the shop. Her expression became tight as a fist, her jaw jutted out like her men's, and like them she only used her voice when it was necessary, though sometimes she would clang out at them with a criticism they did not understand. They would only scowl the family scowl.

For a while she had turned in her shut-up way to Trevor, her last-born. She wanted him to be small and delicate—she had imagined he was of different mould from his brothers—and she had dim ideas of his putting his hand to something more elegant than a pick in the pits. He grew into the tall, gruff image of his brothers. Yet still, when the time came for him to leave school at fourteen, she had bestirred herself, cornering him and speaking in her sullen way:

"Trevor, you don't want to go to that dirty old pit, do you? Plenty of other things to do. One white face let me have coming home to me now."

He had set up a hostile bellow at once. "I'm going to the pit. Dad's going to ask his haulier for me." He stared at her in fear. "To the pits I'm going. You let me alone." He dreaded her hard but seeking approaches; his brothers would poke jeering fun at him, asking him if his napkins were pinned on all right, it was as if they tried to destroy her need of him, snatching him away.

She had even attempted to wring help from her husband: "Walt, why can't Trevor be something else? What do I want with six men in the pit? One collier's more work in the house than four clean-job men."

"Give me a shilling, 'ooman," he said, crossing his red-spotted white muffler, "and don't talk daft." And off he went to the Miskin Arms.

So one bitter January morning she had seen her last-born leave the house with her other men, pit trousers on his lengthening legs and a gleaming new jack and food tin under his arm. From that day he had ranged up inextricably with his brothers, sitting down with them at four o'clock to bacon and potatoes, even the same quantity of everything, and never derided by them again. She accepted his loss, as she was bound to do, though her jutting jaw seemed more bony, thrust out like a lonely hand into the world's air.

They were all on the day shift in the pits, and in a way she had good luck, for not one met with any accidents to speak of,

they worked regular, and had no fancies to stay at home because of a pain in big toe or ear lobe, like some lazybones. So there ought to have been good money in the house. But there wasn't.

They ate most of it, with the rest for drinking. Bacon was their chief passion, and it must be of the best cut. In the shop, where she was never free of debt, nearly every day she would ask for three pounds of thick rashers when others would ask for one, and if Mr. Griffiths would drop a hint, looking significantly at his thick ledger, saying: "Three pounds, Mrs. Rees, *again?*" her reply was always: "I've got big men to feed." As if that was sufficient explanation for all debt and she could do nothing about it; there were big, strapping men in the world and they had to be fed.

Except with one neighbour, she made no kind of real contact with anyone outside her home. And not much inside it. Of the middle height and bonily skimped of body, she seemed extinguished by the assembly of big males she had put into the world off her big husband. Peering out surly from under the poke of her man's cap, she never went beyond the main street of the vale, though as a child she had been once to the seaside, in a buff straw hat ringed with daisies.

Gathered in their pit-dirt for the important four-o'clock meal, with bath pans and hot foods steaming in the fireplace, the little kitchen was crowded as the Black Hole of Calcutta. None of the sons, not even the eldest, looked like marrying, though sometimes, like a shoving parent bird, she would try to push them out of the nest. One or two of them set up brief associations with girls which never seemed to come properly to anything. They were of the kind that never marry until the entertainments of youth, such as football, whippet-racing, and beer, have palled at last. She would complain to her next-door-up neighbour that she had no room to put down even a thimble.

This neighbour, Mrs. Lewis—the other neighbours set her bristling—was her only friend in the place, though the two never entered each other's house. In low voices they conversed over the back wall, exchanging all the eternal woes of women in words of cold, knowledgeable judgment that God Himself could have learnt from. To Mrs. Lewis's remark that Trevor, her last, going to work in the pits ought to set her on her feet now, she said automatically, but sighing for once: "I've got big men to feed." That fact was the core of her world. Trevor's money, even when

he began to earn a man's wage, was of no advantage. Still she was in debt in the shop. The six men were profitless; the demands of their insides made them white elephants.

So now, at fifty, still she could not sit down soft for an hour and dream of a day by the seaside with herself in a clean new dress at last and a draper's-shop hat fresh as a rose.

But often in the morning she skulked to London House, the draper's on the corner of the main road, and stopped for a moment to peer sideways into the window where two wax women, one fair and one dark, stood dressed in all the latest and smiling a pink, healthy smile. Looking beautiful beyond compare, these two ladies were now more living to her than her old dream of a loving daughter. They had no big men to feed and, poised in their eternal shade, smiled leisurely above their furs and silk blouses. It was her treat to see them, as she stood glancing out from under Enoch's thrown-away cap, her toe-sprouting shoes unlaced and her skirt of drab flannel hanging scarecrow. Every other week they wore something new. The days when Mr. Roberts the draper changed their outfits, the sight of the new wonders remained in her eyes until the men arrived home from the pit.

Then one morning she was startled to find the fair wax lady attired in a wonderful white silk nightgown, flowing down over the legs most richly and trimmed with lace at bosom and cuffs. That anyone could wear such luxuriance in bed struck her at first like a blow in the face. Besides, it was a shock to see the grand lady standing there undressed, as you might say, in public. But, staring into the window, she was suddenly thrilled.

She went home feeling this new luxury round her like a sweet, clean silence. Where no men were.

II

At four o'clock they all clattered in, Walt and her five swart sons, flinging down food tins and jacks. The piled heaps of bacon and potatoes were ready. On the scrubbed table were six large plates, cutlery, mugs, and a loaf, a handful of lumpy salt chucked down in the middle. They ate their meal before washing, in their pit-dirt, and the six black faces, red mouths and white eyes gleaming, could be differentiated only by a mother.

Jaw stuck out, she worked about the table, shifting on to each plate four thick slices of bacon, a stream of sizzling fat, ladles of potatoes and tinned tomatoes. They poked their knives into the heap of salt, scattered it over the plate, and began. Lap of tongue around food was their only noise for a while. She poured the thick black tea out of a battered enamel pot big enough for a palace or a workhouse.

At last a football match was mentioned, and what somebody said last night in the Miskin taproom about that little whippet. She got the tarts ready, full-sized plates of them, and they slogged at these; the six plates were left naked in a trice. Oddments followed: cheese, cake, and jams. They only stopped eating when she stopped producing.

She said, unexpectedly: "Shouldn't be surprised if you'd all sit there till doomsday, 'long as I went on bringing food without stoppage."

"Aye," said Ivor. "What about a tin of peaches?"

Yet not one of them, not even her middle-aged husband, had a protuberant belly or any other signs of large eating. Work in the pit kept them sinewy and their sizes as nature intended. Similarly, they could have drunk beer from buckets, like horses, without looking it. Everything three or four times the nice quantities eaten by most people, but no luxuries except that the sons never spread jam thinly on bread like millionaires' sons but in fat dabs, and sometimes they demanded pineapple chunks for breakfast as if they were kings or something. She wondered sometimes that they did not grind up the jam pots, too, in their strong white shiny teeth; but Trevor, the youngest, had the rights to lick the pots, and thrust down his tongue almost to the bottom.

At once, after the meal, the table was shoved back. She dragged in the wooden tub before the fire. The pans were simmering on hobs and fire. Her husband always washed first, taking the clean water. He slung his pit clothes to the corner, belched, and stepped into the tub. He did not seem in a hurry this afternoon. He stood and rubbed up his curls—still black and crisp after fifty years—and bulged the muscle of his black right arm. "Look there," he said, "you pups, if a muscle like that you got at my age, men you can call yourselves."

Ranged about the kitchen, waiting for their bath turn with cigarette stuck to red-licked lower lip, the five sons looked

variously derisive, secure in their own bone and muscle. But they said nothing; the father had a certain power, lordly in his maturity. He stood there naked, handsome, and well-endowed; he stood musing for a bit, liking the hot water round his feet and calves. But his wife, out and in with towels, shirts, and buckets, had heard his remark. With the impatience that had seemed to writhe about her ever since they had clattered in, she cried: "What are you standing there for showing off, you big ram! Wash yourself, man, and get away with you."

He took no notice. One after the other the sons stripped; after the third bath the water was changed, being then thick and heavy as mud. They washed each other's back, and she scuttled in and out, like a dark, irritated crab this afternoon, her angry voice nipping at them. When Ieuan, the eldest and six foot two, from where he was standing in the tub spat across into a pan of fresh water on the fire, in a sudden fury she snatched up the dirty coal-shovel and gave him a ringing smack on his washed behind. Yet the water was only intended for the dirt-crusted tub. He scowled; she shouted: "You blackguard, you keep your spit for public-house floors."

After she had gone into the scullery, Trevor, waiting his turn, grunted: "What's the matter with the old woman today?" Ieuan stepped out of the tub. The shovel blow might have been the tickle of a feather. But Trevor advised him: "Better wash your best face again; that shovel's left marks."

From six o'clock onwards one by one they left the house, all, including Walt, in a navy-blue serge suit, muffler, cap, and yellowish-brown shoes, their faces glistening pale from soap. They strutted away on their long, easy legs to their various entertainments, though with their heads somehow down in a kind of ducking. Their tallness made it a bit awkward for themselves in some of the places down in the pits.

Left alone with the piles of crusted pit clothes, all waiting to be washed or dried of their sweat, she stood taking a cup of tea and nibbling a piece of bread, looking out of the window. Except on Sundays her men seldom saw her take a meal, though even on Sunday she never ate bacon. There was a month or two of summer when she appeared to enjoy a real plate of something, for she liked kidney beans and would eat a whole plateful, standing with her back to the room and looking out of the window towards

the distant mountain brows under the sky, as if she was thinking of Heaven. Her fourth son Emlyn said to her once: "Your Sunday feed lasts you all the week, does it? Or a good guzzle you have when we're in the pit?"

She stood thinking till her head hurt. The day died on the mountain-tops. Where was the money coming from, with them everlastingly pushing expensive bacon into their red mouths? The clock ticked.

Suddenly, taking a coin from a secret place and pulling on a cap, she hurried out. A spot burning in her cheeks, she shot into the corner draper's just as he was about to close, and, putting out her jaw, panted to old Roberts: "What's the price of that silk nightgown on the lady in the window?"

After a glance at the collier's wife in man's cap and skirt rough as an old mat, Roberts said crossly: "A price you can't afford, so there!" But when she seemed to mean business he told her it was seventy bob and elevenpence and he hoped that the pit manager's wife or the doctor's would fancy it.

She said defiantly: ' You sell it to me. A bob or more a week I'll pay you, and you keep it till I've finished the amount. Take it out of the window now at once and lay it by. Go on now, fetch it out."

"What's the matter with you!" he shouted testily, as though he was enraged as well as astonished at her wanting a silk nightgown. "What d'you want it for?"

"Fetch it out," she threatened, "or my husband Walt Rees I'll send to you quick." The family of big, fighting males was well known in the streets. After some more palaver Roberts agreed to accept her instalments and, appeased, she insisted on waiting until he had undraped the wax lady in the window. With a bony, trembling finger she felt the soft white silk for a second and hurried out of the shop.

III

How she managed to pay for the nightgown in less than a year was a mystery, for she had never a penny to spare, and a silver coin in the house in the middle of the week was rare as a Christian in England. But regularly she shot into the draper's and opened her grey fist to Roberts. Sometimes she demanded to see the

nightgown, frightened that he might have sold it for quick money to someone else, though Roberts would shout at her: "What's the matter with you? Packed up safe it is."

One day she braved his wrath and asked if she could take it away, promising faithful to keep up the payments. But he exclaimed: "Be off! Enough tradesmen here been ruined by credit. Buying silk nightgowns indeed! What next?"

She wanted the nightgown in the house; she was fearful it would never be hers in time. Her instinct told her to be swift. So she hastened, robbing still further her own stomach and in tiny lots even trying to rob the men's, though they would scowl and grumble if even the rind was off their bacon. But at last, when March winds blew down off the mountains so that she had to wrap round her scraggy chest the gaunt shawl in which her five lusty babies had been nursed, she paid the last instalment. Her chin and cheeks blue in excitement, she took the parcel home when the men were in the pit.

Locking the door, she washed her hands, opened the parcel, and sat with the silk delicately in her hands, sitting quiet for half an hour at last, her eyes come out in a gleam from her dark face, brilliant. Then she hid the parcel down under household things in a drawer which the men never used.

A week or two later, when she was asking for the usual three pounds of bacon at the shop, Mr. Griffith said to her, stern: "What about the old debts, now then? Pity you don't pay up, instead of buying silk nightgowns. Cotton is good enough for my missus to sleep in, and you lolling in silk, and don't pay for all your bacon and other things. Pineapple chunks every day. Hoo!" And he glared.

"Nightgown isn't for *my* back," she snapped. "A wedding present for a relation it is." But she was a bit winded that the draper had betrayed her secret to his fellow tradesman.

He grumbled: "Don't know what you do with all you take out of my shop. Bacon every day enough to feed a funeral, and tins of fruit and salmons by the dozen. Eat for fun, do you?"

"I've got big men to feed." She scowled, as usual.

Yet she seemed less saturnine as she sweated over the fireplace and now never once exclaimed in irritation at some clumsiness of the men. Even when, nearly at Easter, she began to go bad, no complaint came from her, and of course the men did not notice,

for still their bacon was always ready and the tarts as many, their bath water hot, and evening shirts ironed.

On Easter Bank Holiday, when she stopped working for a while because the men had gone to whippet races over in Maerdy Valley, she had time to think of her pains. She felt as if the wheels of several coal wagons had gone over her body, though there were no feeling at all in her legs. When the men arrived home at midnight, boozed up, there were hot faggots for them, basting pans savoury full, and their pit clothes were all ready for the morning. She attended on them in a slower fashion, her face closed and her body shorter, because her legs had gone bowed. But they never noticed, jabbering of the whippets.

Mrs. Lewis next door said she ought to stay in bed for a week. She replied that the men had to be fed.

A fortnight later, just before they arrived home from the pit and the kitchen was hot as a furnace, her legs kicked themselves in the air, the full frying-pan in her hand went flying, and when they came in they found her black-faced on the floor with the rashers of bacon all about her. She died in the night as the district nurse was wetting her lips with water. Walt, who was sleeping in a chair downstairs, went up too late to say farewell.

Because the house was upside down as a result, with the men not fed properly, none of them went to work in the morning. At nine o'clock Mrs. Lewis next door, for the first time after thirty years back-wall friendship with the deceased, stepped momentously into the house. But she had received her instructions weeks ago. After a while she called down from upstairs to the men sitting uneasy in the kitchen: "Come up; she is ready now."

They slunk up in procession, six big men, with their heads ducked, disturbed out of the rhythm of their daily life of work, food, and pub. And entering the room for the last view, they stared in surprise.

A stranger lay on the bed ready for her coffin. A splendid, shiny, white silk nightgown flowing down over her feet, with rich lace frilling bosom and hands, she lay like a lady taking a rest, clean and comfortable. So much they stared, it might have been an angel shining there. But her face jutted stern, bidding no approach to the contented peace she had found.

The father said, cocking his head respectfully: "There's a fine 'ooman she looks. Better than when I married her!"

"A grand nightshirt," mumbled Enoch. "That nurse brought it in her bag?"

"A shroud they call it," said Emlyn.

"In with the medical benefits it is," said his father soberly. "Don't they dock us enough every week from our wages?"

After gazing for a minute longer at the white apparition, lying there so majestically unknown, they filed downstairs. There Mrs. Lewis awaited them. "Haven't you got no 'ooman relation to come in and look after you?" she demanded.

The father shook his head, scowling in effort to concentrate on a new problem. Big, black-curled, and still vigorous, he sat among his five strapping sons who, like him, smelt of the warm, dark energy of life. He said: "A new missus I shall have to be looking for. Who is there about, Mrs. Lewis, that is respectable and can cook for us and see to our washings? My boys I got to think about. A nice little widow or something you know of that would marry a steady working chap? A good home is waiting for her by here, though a long day it'll be before I find one that can feed and clean us like the one above; *she* worked regular as a clock, fair play to her."

"I don't know as I would recommend any 'ooman," said Mrs. Lewis with rising colour.

"Pity you're not a widow! Ah well, I must ask the landlady of the Miskin if she knows of one," he said, concentrated.

Caleb's Ark

CALEB WAS A GAUNT, middle-aged bachelor of thrifty habits, who lived in a shabby old cottage beside the river and under the frown of the black-browed hill of Llan Powis. Though peculiar, a few women, in a roundabout way, had proposed marriage to him—he had been left a few hundred pounds by his father, who had been a cockle dealer—but Caleb shook his swarthy head and turned back to the interpretation of prophecies in the Book of Revelation and other picturesque scripture. His nose was always running, his gaze insecure and nervous, but he was heavy and

strong. And this world seemed to him created solely for the purpose of being destroyed again, malignantly. God was a pirate roaming the skies with cannons and other destructive ammunition.

He did no work. What was the use of labouring when it was certain this world was doomed to destruction? Yet there were times when Caleb liked the world: he did not wish to leave it. He often paused to admire the flaring gold and red of his cockerel who strutted proud among his seven silver-spangled Hamburg hens; and the gross fat energy of the sow and boar he kept behind the cottage also roused him to admiration. He could see that the world moved and had being in certain attractive ways. But, nevertheless, a curse remained on it; Caleb was certain that sooner or later in his lifetime it was to be demolished. Did he not often in dreams see it gobbled up like a fowl in the mouth of a wolf?

The great sea lay two miles down the river from the cottage. From that, too, destruction could come. Mighty waves. Outside the cottage the river was quite narrow. Often Caleb felt he ought to move to some position high on the hill. But the cottage seemed to depend on him like an affectionate animal; he liked the look of it waiting for him as he returned from a brooding walk. Sometimes Margiad Jenkins, who had been postwoman for twenty years, said to him such as this:

"Caleb, Caleb, your old pants want darning, indeed. There's a disgrace on the line! Let me have them now." She looked in horror at the flapping garment which he had washed and hung out.

"I can patch and I can sew," Caleb muttered distrustfully.

Margiad was continually offering her domestic services. She was a dumpy, slack-bodied woman of fifty, who kept secret her bad varicose veins, in case her job would be taken from her: she tramped many miles a day delivering her letters in scattered farms and cottages. She said to Caleb then, unable to suppress the little fund of malice in her:

"Not a handsome sight you'll be in a ragged pair of pants if the bad old world got drownded and you was thrown up on the seashore of Heaven."

"You mock, woman," Caleb replied menacingly; "you mock where wise men would shiver."

"Here's a letter for you," she said. "Ha'penny stamp, a circular it is from the Socialist candidate. I wish I was bringing you a love

letter instead." And, cackling, she made off, down between the nodding flowers.

According to his reading of the Scriptures, a catastrophe was due very soon. Men flew through the air, and in London, he was told, they also travelled in trains under the earth; such perversities were omens; proud and vain in their shocking accomplishments, men were to be brought to their original simplicity. The process would be painful. It had been given to him to see the vanity of these wicked men; he had stood apart and watched their ridiculous antics. They would pay. Every Monday morning Caleb washed his mass of rudely cut hair and bathed in expectation of disaster, for somehow he felt he would escape.

November brought a battalion of storms. Winds roared, the sea snarled, clouds ran out of the sky and burst over Llan Powis: the terrible rains of that winter began. Caleb, his insecure eyes popping with excitement, had very little sleep, and each early morning he stood at the door of his cottage and searched for signs of the world's debacle. The charging clouds, the whipped water of the river, the savage winds gnawing at the hilltop—they were ominous enough in their fierce strength, but as yet there was no majestic damage visible.

Yet how startling were the nights! Then the howling winds and the thrashing rain tossed the world like a child's rubber ball through the very clouds. Caleb became quite certain that the world had been torn out of its usual orbit and chucked into a desolate grey place where the elements were wilder than wild beasts. Quite soon now the truth of its position would be fully revealed. Such rain had never fallen on the earth before. It hissed and beat madly; it stamped on his garden and jumped through his thatch; it ate up the light of day and tore the night to shreds. Caleb began to foresee it was through the rain that the end would come.

He watched the river with a smile of excitement. Yes, it was rising. And the roar of the sea could be heard: the sea was swollen. The waters of the world were rising. Caleb removed his clothes and walked seven times in the rain round his cottage, to become accustomed to the unheated wet. Nevertheless, he had a plan. He believed that if he imitated a previous example, God would see that a man who took warnings seriously was still left in the earth and forgive accordingly. He would make himself an ark.

Or, rather, buy one—a boat which could be used as an ark. Tom Prosser had been unable to sell his boat, and it now lay rotting not far from the cottage, so it ought to be cheap. The day of his decision Margiad arrived with a letter, screaming through the door.

"Let me in, Caleb, let me in. I'm drowning fast and I can't swim at all." When Caleb unwillingly opened the door, she panted: "If I was only a duck! If I was only a black duck, I wouldn't mind now, not a bit." Dripping over the sanded stone flags, she pushed her way into the kitchen. "Let me have five minutes by your fire, Caleb, and if you have a spoonful of hot broth, I wouldn't say no. Here is a letter for you. Ha'penny stamp and from the seed merchants."

"I want no letters," Caleb announced with the mien of a prophet. "And can seeds be sown in water?"

"Well," said Margiad literally, "there's lilies that grow in water, and cress, and——"

"Not in the waters that are about to cover the earth!" he thundered.

Margiad, perceiving his ecstasy, immediately became respectful. She dropped the petticoats she had been holding up before the fire, and likewise her eyelids; she looked pious and humble. He continued, powerful in his belief now:

"Listen now to me, woman, and you spread my warning as you take letters on the round. Disaster is about to come on us. Take warning and double warning. But I know they will not listen. As for me, I shall take my ark to the top of Llan Powis, together with my cockerel, hens, and my pigs. A store of victuals, too, and a barrel of drinking water and a dove. My ark will float over all the world!" His loosened eyes became brilliant with triumph, his voice rose. "And then when all else is dead and the water is subsided, if God sees fit to rescue me I shall step out into a clean Land, yea, a fresh Land. Even as Noah in a time before."

Margiad gently lifted her eyelids. "And what about a Mrs. Noah, Caleb? There will have to be a Mrs. Noah. Come now! The fowls and the pigs will be all right, and you will not lack for eggs and bacon, indeed. But what about a wife in the ark, for things to be proper?"

Caleb roamed round the kitchen, clapping his hands behind his back. Taking a wife had not occurred to him, having pro-

ceeded in life so long without one. Then he decided he couldn't stop now and choose one, there was no time. He announced definitely:

"Heaven will provide, if it is seen fit that I shall be rescued."

"Now, now, make sure, Caleb," she cried anxiously. "Very cold and wet and lonely will the ark be up there. And a wife can keep watch for the dove coming back while you sleep."

"You go out from my kitchen now!" Caleb shouted. "I know what I know."

When he had driven her away he made his final preparations, taking some of his money from the earth under the lilac beside the door. Swathing himself in old canvas, he walked out to Tom Prosser's house that sat on another lap of the hill. The howling wind and the lashing tails of rain kept his exaltation continually on the boil. He had neither eyes nor ears for mockery. Prosser was only too glad to be rid of his derelict old boat, for which Caleb handed cash. Caleb then found the village, which was concealed in another angry cloudburst, and interviewed eight farm labourers idle because of the prolonged wet. In exchange for a fee of ten shillings each they were to drag the boat up the side of Llan Powis. The men, steady members of the chapel, eyed Caleb with a mixture of respect and good-humour. But one said thoughtfully:

"All drownded except you we are going to be. What use then ten shillings? No shops or banks are there in Heaven, surely now."

Caleb saw the heaving world from the inn window. "Don't you stop me with vain arguments," he raved, hostile. "A new spotless shroud you can buy with the ten shillings. Lay yourself in it on the sixth day from now. Doom is on us."

Had God put prophetic fire in Caleb's tongue? And there were scarlet stars in his cheeks. No man remembered the like of these storms that followed one after the other. Even as they searched for ropes and poles awful thunder rushed out of the sky like a legion of bellowing black angels, and great white-hot silver cracks split the clouds and ran hissing across the whole world. If it was true that the earth was being demolished, it could not be done in better style. Far away under their minds the men half believed and began to think secretly of the caves in the hills, where their forefathers had crouched on similar occasions.

That afternoon the *Nansi*, black and leaky in the mud beside

the river, was pulled and pushed with much secret swearing up Llan Powis's sodden side. Half-way up, the men, wet to the skin, struck and demanded their money threateningly. Caleb paid out. The men announced that they would finish the job in the morning. "What if the Flood comes during the night!" Caleb shouted between claps of appropriate thunder. The men, longing for cups of steaming tea, left him gesticulating on the icy hillside. But that night, it was said, several of them were visited by dreams of terrible woes to come.

Margiad paid an unofficial visit to Caleb the next morning. She wept, she cajoled, she threatened. And even the Postmaster-General, she declared, would not expect her to deliver letters to an ark on top of a wet hill, so Caleb would be cut off entirely from the warmth of human beings. He remained unmoved. Then she implored him to take with him plenty of flannel under-things, an oil stove, and a bottle of cough mixture. At last he said angrily:

"Get behind me, woman: I see horns on your forehead."

Wearing black oilskins, the chapel minister called, too, frowning at Caleb's presumption in meddling with sacred matters. But, denunciatory, Caleb was more than a match for him. Afire again, Caleb set out to rouse the hired men, for the river had risen several inches and there were menacing sheets of water over the flat fields the other side. He had to offer another ten shillings before the men could be induced out again; in spite of their fears and bad dreams, their wives were behind them.

Before evening the *Nansi* was safe on top of Llan Powis; she rested against a rock. Caleb then employed three of the men to assist him in carrying up her cargo. The pigs made a great fuss of the journey; the fowls were carried in baskets, clucking with alarm. Pieces of wood, hammer and nails, food and water, a tub to catch the rain, bedding, a Bible, and a dove purchased in the village, these were deposited in the ark before nightfall. And all the time the wind howled and wailed, the sky broke and broke again, the rain streamed.

Caleb knelt on the deck and, large icy drops striking his face, asked for a blessing on the ark. Had he not seen that the world was full of evil? It was no place for a chaste and innocent man. If God required him to represent his kind in the new world, which was to appear when the waters subsided, he would promise to

live without corruption. Let the foul old cities disappear; their stink was everywhere. Let men and women be drowned; they were of no more account than frogs. He had seen the bestiality of people too long; let the world be made into a sink of dirty water. And he would release a dove that would find the white hilltop; and when the waters subsided, would there not be a wonderful new orchard? And underneath a blossoming apple tree a woman fresh from the hand of the Creator? Caleb was sure of it; he had faith. Concluding, he rose.

The swine he had pushed under the deck were troublesome, irritably thrusting their snouts over bare wood and squealing their dismay. Caleb turned them out on the sodden grass in the dark and they were gratified; time enough to pull them in again when the waters had risen to the hilltop. As yet the fowls were too overcome to protest against their limited space under a deck shelter; they remained huddled in affright, even the cock. The dove was stored away in a dark corner. After much preparation, and commanding his ears to listen for the sound of the rising waters, Caleb crawled under the deck among the bedding and fell asleep.

The storms raged for another week. No one would have believed the sky could hold such stocks of rain and wind. In the nights Caleb could hear the screams of witches and monster birds who had been blown out of their fastnesses among the hills. Soon the churchyards would throw into the air their crackling and groaning skeletons; and afterwards would float everywhere the swollen dark-green drowned corpses of people he had known. He spent much time in prayer; he fasted; he made the swine and fowls fast too. The fourth day two fowls, looking stupefied, passed away, and on the fifth day the sow also, who had been coughing miserably since her removal to the ark. The dove remained as if petrified in its cage.

No matter. In the new world new beasts would surely appear, with better eggs and different bacon. Caleb passed the days plucking and washing the fowls in the rain and cutting the sow into pieces of pork. He went to the side of the hill to peer down into the river valley. The rain was so thick he could see nothing. But there were moaning sounds and the sounds of gurgling waters: people drowning and floods eating into their dwellings. Happy, Caleb praised Heaven for its destructive work.

The sixth day, while he was lying under the deck feeling strangely light of body, there was a loud knocking against the side of the boat. An Angel! Come to warn him that tonight his ark was to float high over the world! He crawled out and stared excitedly over the boat side.

"Caleb, Caleb," shrieked Margiad above the wind, "or is your name Noah now? But here is a letter for Caleb. From your brother in America, that hasn't wrote for a year. . . . How are you man? Speak, and don't stare at me like that! Speak now!"

"You go away!" shouted Caleb, very upset. "Tomorrow you'll be taking hot letters across Satan's land, you ugly bat."

"Let me come into your ark," yelled the undiminished Margiad. "Swing down the ladder now." And taking a packet of sweets out of her bag, she added coaxingly: "Some Paradise Fruits I have for you here. Look."

"Go away. Your fruits are poisoned," he raved.

"The river," she called, "is in a flood over your garden. I been into your house and took up the mats. An old rat has eaten into your bag of flour and the rain is chewing your thatch."

"The rats will live last!" he bellowed, laughing. "They will swim about and gnaw at your dead hands."

"Your face is white," she shrieked, staring at him through the rain. "Pneumonia will have you and cold in the bowels. You want to die, Caleb, you want to die?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Jealous are the drowning. God's new fire is in my bowels. Take yourself off my ark! The ark of the Lord this is. Don't you foul it now."

For Margiad was attempting to clamber into the boat, heaving herself up. Caleb, raving, was about to stamp on her fingers when he collapsed limply on the deck. The cockerel flew out of its shelter in noisy hysteria and ran madly over the boat. The dying male swine under the deck snored with strange, delicate snores. Margiad, with much difficulty, for she was plump, landed on deck flat and panting like a rotund fish. She dragged Caleb out of the rain into shelter.

Before the day was out she had supervised his removal, on a stretcher, back to the cottage. And that same day, with a few last clouts of rain and the wind kicking its final fury against the eternal hills, the storms abated. Except for the flooded river and a few battered fields, the world looked just the same. But Caleb,

the doctor declared, had pneumonia; very likely he would die.

Margiad, however, made up her mind that he would not die. She took up abode in the cottage and became a very lively woman, a woman with a mission. Her sturdy mockery frightened Death away from the cottage door. After five weeks of clever ministrations Caleb sat up and lamented:

"Why is it the old world didn't go under? Never again a yellow or a red sun, but a black sun! For a while whatever. Now it is the same again." He seemed dispirited, weary.

"The Big Boss changed His mind," Margiad, knitting a new vest for him, said comfortably. "And now clear are the intentions. Settle down like other chaps you must. No more floods for ten thousand years again. A warning to tickle us was the last. Say how you would like this vest, Caleb, with long sleeves or short sleeves? The colour you like? A blue very pretty. The colour of Hope, they always say."

Thus she continually tried to occupy his mind with mundane things. She made herself indispensable; she showed him how fair are the ways of a woman in the house: the lamps burned brighter, the oven flourished, the sink was sweet, the bed neat as a daisy. She asked him where his money was hidden; she had used enough of her own savings. Under the lilac. She dug, counted, and kept an account. Two hundred and seventy pounds left. With her job, and when better he must work at a farm, they could manage very well. Visitors came to the house and treated her, beside his bed, as Mrs. Caleb—she had done wonders, she had rescued him from Jordan, so it was only right.

For a long time he kept mumbling of blows delivered to him that were beyond repair. He took to more visions; with a dusty broom she belaboured them. He still looked down his long icy nose at the shoddy people in the evil world; she made him golden apple-pies. She waited cunningly, and one week when he was weary, vacant, and bored, she married him. On a Thursday. And on Friday morning he was a changed man.

Margiad returned from her round and bustled into the cottage, whistling a small, pleased tune. Caleb sat in the armchair still looking astonished. She whipped off coat and hat and tied on an apron. "Up at Magpie Farm," she said seductively, "a very nice job of work they have waiting for you."

Caleb sat quiet, half awake, not quite come through.

"A new world proper for you today!" she went on amiably. "The old one was drownded, after all."

Caleb sat as if he still whispered, faintly like a ghost, after glories beyond the table, the dresser smelling of furniture polish and the gleaming china dogs of the kitchen. But Margiad sang. She began to dust the pictures with the new feather brush she had bought in Woolworth's on market day.

"Fifteen bob," she said presently, "I got for the old ark. Only firewood and such is it good for now. A bad loss on the bad side of the ledger, Caleb dear. A prank expensive, pigs and fowls in the same sum. Full stop now though, let it be forgotten. A double line under the odd business."

Caleb wiped his weeping nose.

Over at Rainbow Bottom

SIAN SHURLOCK'S COTTAGE was over at Rainbow Bottom, in the lee of an ancient quarry which glowed a rosy tan in the sunset. Everything, except Sian's husbands, flourished with great exuberance there. Twisted ropes of foliage, hung with huge pink and white trumpets of convolvulus, writhed like plumed and garlanded serpents down the quarry's face. Trees and flowers took their ease there with fertile pleasure; it was an early place too for thick-blooded blackberries. Stout toads and frogs leapt about a pond of rich green slime, and the spiders were big and muscular. The cottage itself, white and fat-stoned, was squared about with a buxom hedge of black yew crusted with myriads of silver-shivering webs. An apple tree on Sian's round of lawn bore chubby fruit cheeked like prize babies.

It was a cottage to be happy in and Sian Shurlock suited it. She would often sing at her work, in a peculiar voice that couldn't be called musical in the concert-hall sense. But it had a strangely enticing quality; in it was both nude wail and provoking laughter. It made the rare pedestrians—for Rainbow Bottom was right off the main road—stop outside the cottage to listen. Independent

by nature, she made up the words to her own tunes. Nobody could make sense of either.

In the country a woman cannot bury four husbands before she is forty without causing remark. People did not say that Sian disposed of her four in an illegal way—there was old Doctor Matthews and certificates to prove they died of simple and acceptable complaints; one, heart failure; two, poisoned leg; three, consumption; four, heart failure—but after the death of the fourth they did not expect she would tempt Providence a fifth time. Besides, Sian herself had announced that she was tired of men letting her down.

And she had had to buy another grave—which also meant two marble tombstones—and the expense had seemed to sober her. True, there would be room for still another husband, in addition to herself, in the new grave, but why should she be crowded thus! "No," she had said, "expecting I am to lie alone with my dear Edgar, that was my quietest." She had always insisted that her fourth husband turned out to be her best.

"But what is she going to do," asked Tomos Tomos in the Unicorn taproom, "at the Last Trump when the other three next door rise up too and make claim on her? Christian it's not."

"These days," said Jonas Gammy Foot stolidly, "been proved it has that rise up we don't."

Tomos, his nostrils quivering with what looked like fright, suddenly announced: "Started singing again she has, whatever! And dropped her black. Passing her way I was this morning."

Edgar had been buried only two months. In strict mourning, Sian had kept silent over at Rainbow Bottom. Very quiet the cottage in that drowsy warmth among the quarry's lush foliage. If you listened you could hear the delicate whirr of azure butterflies, or tread of a fat spider scurrying across a trembling web to snatch some unwary fly, and afterwards perhaps the champ of dry jaws chewing a wing or a leg. Sian judged that two months of this quiet was sufficient.

So that morning, after a breakfast of green bacon, two fried eggs and shop strawberry jam piled thick on her own beautiful snowy bread, she began singing in her odd way. Her voice throbbed with a throaty wail that seemed to call both hungrily and promise soothing delights. But the words were any old nonsense that came to her mind:

"Rubies, queen's heads and men's pound notes,
The flue wants sweeping and oven won't hot,
And merry milkmaid in size six shoes
Tugs old man's beard round by Cuckoo's Knob,
Twt, twt, twt.
On a bladder of lard his will he wrote,
Soda do clean and soap do wash,
Very dear they are, too dear for old Emma Jones,
Hob y derri dando!
Three ribs he broke, there's fish in his boots,
On toast the eyes of frogs do shine,
Come in, come in, no money it costs,
Ay, ay, ay, ay. . . ."

And she came out into her garden in the sunny August morning, a basket for blackberries in her hand. Her mourning gone, she wore a dress barred with yellow and mulberry rings like a wasp's back. She was light-footed and her gleaming eyes were alert; her long slender legs and arms, her lively body and lithe neck were to match. She was like a brilliant insect or thin gorgeous beetle going brisk to some thieving task.

Soon the blackberries' purple blood had stained her thin fingers that, oddly enough, could never grasp light but gripped too furious, with a tenacious bite. They were fingers that would squeeze the very last drop out of lemon or udder. As she finished singing a little smile lurked on her heart-shaped small mouth. But, agile among the briars, she began again, her voice full of that old magic. And Tomos Tomos appeared up the lane. He stopped and listened, an uneasy torpor come into his honest eyes. Only when a bee zoomed warningly into his face did he lift his legs again.

Sian had seen him out of the tail of her wren-bright eye. But she took no notice of him. He disappeared slowly and as if unwillingly. She went on singing. And soon the postman came. He had not been to Sian's cottage since he had delivered the undertaker's bill for Edgar's funeral, submitted a week after.

"There you are, then, Johnnie Post," sang Sian without surprise. "A fortune from America you've brought me?"

Sheepishly he handed a letter. His red ears twitched. Unmarried—not like Tomos Tomos—he was young as a colt, un-

finished about shoulders and hips. Sian treated him with short shrift, even though he lingered, mouth open and eye staring.

"Bit of hot weather staying," he mumbled. "Redding your apples are."

"And waiting for their letters people are!" she pointed out, slamming the gate and skimming up the garden path with the full basket. "Be off now."

It was a letter from the Monumental Mason, sending an estimate for the tombstone, lettering inclusive but a marble dove to rest on the stone extra. Sian frowned for a moment as she sat in her cosy parlour. Marble was dear, but white was not so dear as black. A dove she could do without too.

And soon she began to sing again, going out to pick the leaping asters for her walnut table. Then presently over the road, where people so seldom came, strode a sailor, blue trousers flapping round his ankles.

"Back you are, then, Emlyn Pugh!" Sian sang, seeing him loiter at the gate. "Ship in port, is it then?"

"Aye," said Emlyn, shifting his feet, shy and looking down. "Fortnight's leave."

"Going for a walk you are," she suggested. "Well, no nice lanes there are on ship, no doubt." And, one big puce aster dangling from her hand, she went inside, carefully shutting the front door. After a moment's hesitation he went on to see the new bull at Mafeking Farm.

She threw wide the windows, she opened the door. Her singing throbbed out into the blue air, shaking the dried, curled leaves on the climbing rose-bush:

"Wet is the sea and cockles are cold,
The devil would like this blackberry pie,
Back leg is off my dear one's chair,
Hoity-toity, oh!
Dull is the brass, the lamp it smokes,
Money do dusters cost, and polish and oil,
Cheaper to be dead, and those that live
Shall handsome stones and marble dove buy,
Ay, cheaper to be dead!"

And up the road, looking vacant and glassy-eyed, hurried a stout man in homespun and a billycock hat. It was Oswallt

Prosser, Insurance. As a rule he never came that way on his rounds. He too loitered uneasy near the yew hedge, listening to that singing. Finally he forced his unwilling legs a few steps beyond the cottage, but went back and, perspiring, unlatched the gate and walked up to the open door. All the time, Sian, in her parlour, kept singing her nonsense. And, still singing, she appeared in the doorway.

"'Morning, Sian Shurlock," he stammered. "Passing I was, and wondered if a bit of business we could do these days."

Sian looked rebuking. "Now then, Oswallt Prosser, knowing you are very well that I belong to the Globe and Timeglass Company. Very tidy they treated me, thank you, and paid up quick for my poor Edgar." She craned her white neck and her lively foot gave a pirouette. "Besides, nothing else is there for me to insure now." And her black eyes flashed, derisive.

"Hot it is," he mumbled. "Out canvassing I am. A little glass of small beer you don't want have you got?" His eyes went past her desirously into the rosy coolness of her spick-and-span parlour.

"Not a drop," she said, preparing to carefully shut the door. "Be off now on your rounds; the wrong way you've come surely!" And with forbidding politeness she asked: "Mrs. Prosser keeping well, is she?"

He turned, scowling, away. Half an hour later she was singing once more, waking the drowsy toads and frogs in their mossy nooks about the pond and disturbing the myriad spiders at their elegant silver labours in the quarry.

"The teapot is broke and almanack says Friday,
Pancakes for supper, thin as a weasel's tail,
The old fox in his hole got a limp hind leg,
Nothing else is there for me to insure now,
Hanky-panky, ah!"

She had come out into the garden again, in her dress of mulberry and yellow rings. The rector, carrying a sheaf of parish magazines, approached, but stopped, listening, in the shade of a hazel. He frowned, stayed a little longer, then, pursing his lips, egged himself back in the direction he had come. The noon sun looked out of the sky like a lion.

But in the afternoon she was quiet, taking a nap on the chintz sofa, where poor Edgar had suddenly breathed his last one afternoon in the June heat wave. In the early evening, however, her voice rose again, and with extra vigour, while she plucked a few ready apples off the tree over the front round of lawn. She could even be heard over at Mafeking Farm, disturbing the labourers who had just finished mowing a field of barley. Dusk was soft as peach-bloom.

And over Rainbow Bottom road, wandering with a puzzled look on his lean brown face, came Ted Thomas, late sergeant of the Hussars.

Jaw down, he stopped and listened. He did not go to the front gate, for, accustomed to service on the North-West Frontier, he was a wary man. He crept round noiseless in the hedge's shadow, reconnoitred from the quarry's depths, and then, brushing aside a web from under his very nose and greatly annoying a spider who had just been getting ready to scuttle out to an entangled fly, he peered into the garden from a certain gap in the hedge. Sian went on singing: Ted listened in profound meditation. There was no pleasure in his face. Only a dramatic vacancy, like one under the influence. Suddenly, with that decision for which military men are famed, he strode away from the hedge, straightened himself smartly, and plunged off the way he had come. The singing followed him: Ted went faster.

He was staying at the Unicorn. He had come to the district to rout out old acquaintances after twenty years' absence. Forty and single, he had no relations. That night he asked soberly in the taproom: "Hoy, who's living over in Rainbow Bottom now, then?"

No one spoke for a minute or two. Ted added in the gathering stupor, while the oil lamp jumped: "That woman that sings. . . . A name she's got?" he demanded with sudden truculence, in the silence. He began to glare around at the yellow-shadowed faces hanging dismayed in the clouds of shag-smoke.

At last Tomos Tomos, his voice rattling like a choke in his stringy neck, shot out: "Sian Shurlock she is. And not long buried husband number four."

"Four!" started Ted, and his jaw dropped.

There was another sudden and oppressive silence. No one peered at Ted. Then Jonas Gammy Foot, with dainty tact, enquired soft: "Funny things you've seen in those foreign lands,

Sergeant? Us by here don't see nothing 'cept a cow with cloven hoof, p'raps, and healthy pigs struck sudden with the swine fever. These big Indian snakes," he encouraged, "artful they are as they say?"

But Ted Thomas only shook his head. Plunged in deep thought, his scorched cheeks sucked in and his fuzz of bleached hair upright, he even ignored his beer. Seeing him thus, the others left him alone, squeezing up their eyes as they looked at each other. Harvest was discussed. But Ted slowly lifted his head, inclined one ear towards the window, while his nostrils twitched. He finished his beer, got up, and swung out.

The night was fair. A crow's mile lay between Rainbow Bottom and the Unicorn. But Ted thought he distinctly heard the singing. He set off smartly, wishing he had his mare, Goldcrest, under him. And, sure enough, when he got to Sian's cottage and looked in at the gate, there she was at the open lamp-lit window behind the apple tree, rubbing something into her hair and happily singing:

"Say it does the hair keeps bright and glossy,
Half a crown the bottle and smelling of violets,
Half-past nine and time for bed and sleeping.
Good-night to Friday, oh!"

He strode up the garden path and knocked. Unafraid, the lamp shining behind her on glossy wood and bright wool-worked cushions, she opened the door, smiling pleasantly.

"Sian Shurlock you are?" he said, in his excitement going back to the sing-song of his boyhood. "Ted Thomas I am. Sergeant of the Hussars till last week, but brought up on Neifion Farm back over the hill by there."

"The way to the Unicorn you want?" she asked, demure.

He looked at her, in her yellow and mulberry ringed gown, and her long fingers white on the door. "Nice home you got," he said, hoarse and pathetic. "In India I been for twelve years."

"And the Queen of Sheba I am," she tinkled. "Come on in then, Sergeant Thomas."

She sat him on the flowered chintz of the sofa; she brought glasses and a pint of fruit cordial made by herself. She was teetotal as the cock top of St. Michael's spire. Her black eyes were lively

as a young girl's and there was fun in the sleek stretch of her white neck. She did not need intoxicants.

Neither did Ted. Military discipline and the arid plains of India had taught him austerity. A cosy cottage in his native country and a cheerful wife were all he required now. A soldier makes up his mind quickly. After praising the cordial, and his spellbound eyes fixed immovably on her, he said:

"I got my pension, and I been putting by. Close on two hundred quid in the bank. A drunkard and a spendthrift I am not. A hoss was my pleasure only."

Sian sat folded in on her little smile. Her dangling feet waltzed happily. But she said: "Content I am as I am."

Ted strained. He said: "Clean I am in the house, a good riser in the morning, and can sole shoes good as any cobbler."

"No doubt," she said.

He tapped his chest. "I got tattoos. On here and on my back. Best collection in the regiment it was."

"Let me see," she said.

In a moment he had stripped to the waist. And he was a treasure-house of beautiful pictures. She gazed at them in excitement. On his hairless chest the centre show-piece was the Leaning Tower of Pisa, with a jug of flowers, galloping horses, crossed flags and a parrot in splendid array about it. Around both his arms coiled a brilliant serpent. More wonderful still was the Lord's Supper occupying the main stretch of his flat back, complete in every detail down to the upset salt-cellar. At Sian's shrill exclamation of delight behind him, he said proudly:

"Aye, in Canterbury that was done, when I was a trooper. Not many like it there's in this country today. Chap that did it is dead now."

"There's colours!" she cried. "There's brightness! There's lovely!"

"Look at them all day and all night you can for ever!" he suggested earnestly. He pointed to four photographs of tidy-looking men, ranged on the mantelpiece in frames to match. "Bad luck you've had till now, p'raps?"

She nodded. Her black round eyes were alert, as she sat with her fingers scratching the back of her hand. She smelled nice of hair lotion and her little pink tongue came out thoughtful between her pretty pointed teeth. But it was plain she was still doubtful.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked suddenly. "You are delicate?"

"A bout of malaria I had," he confessed. "That's all."

Her black eyes whirred. They seemed to have no lids.

"The winter is coming," she tinkled. "Your feet I must keep warm soon as the owls begin to hoot."

In the morning she wrote off to the Monumental Mason to accept his estimate. And concerning the lettering, she wrote, let there be a good space left underneath, as the stone was for a new grave with only one in it. She decided to have a marble dove too, a black one. The letter done, she made a plate of apple-tart, unlocking a cupboard to get some cloves. On the top shelf were bottles of high green, dark purple and tawny stuffs: Sian understood how to brew not only the showy plants of the hedges but also the small demure simples lurking under them. Ted came again in time for dinner. In the sunshine she saw the wan sapped light in his eyes; even in the summer he looked whipped by cold. Her happy feet waltzed as she laid the meal. Not even her four husbands had seen those feet bare: they had little stretches of delicate skin, like webs, between the toes.

She closed the door. She sang no more. And no one else came over the road to Rainbow Bottom.

The Pits are on the Top

SNOW WHIRLED PRETTILY ABOUT THE BUS in the bright noon light. Through a hatch in his glass cabin the driver gossiped with a policeman so enormously majestic that the flakes seemed nervous of fluttering on his blue cape; they just melted away in the fiery red of his face. The bus, a single-decker, was slowly filling up; in a few minutes it would begin its steep journey up the vale, right to the top where the pits were.

A girl entered with her young man. They sat near the front. Something of the bright, chill shine of the morning was in her oval face: he was dark, sturdy-looking and brisk, though his face had that azure pallor of the underground worker. As the couple

entered and found seats together a little interested silence fell over the other passengers, who, except for the district nurse, were all married-looking women. Everybody, of course, knew that Bryn Jones was courting Dilys Morgan: perhaps they had come down to the shops that morning to buy the engagement ring.

The couple settled, interest was withdrawn from them and conversation resumed to more important matters. There was a youngish, serious-looking woman with a wreath on her knees. It was composed of red tulips, white chrysanthemums and two long-tongued orchids which were the colour of speckled toads. She eyed the wreath with uncertainty and went on with her complaint:

"Fifteen shillings, and in the summer a bigger wreath than this you can get for seven-and-six. The price of flowers! And soon as I've taken this up I've got to come down again and be fitted for my black. Potching about!" She spoke as if she wanted to administer reproof to someone or something.

"It's bronchitis weather," sighed a fat woman with a large basket on her knees. Top of the bulgy basket was a loaf of bread, a bag of cakes and a tin of peaches. "Did he——" she asked the woman with the wreath, hesitant, "did he *think* he was going?"

"No. A hearty dinner enough he ate and spoke as if it was no different Sunday to any other. Then he went to lay down on the couch in the front room. Middle of the afternoon my sister heard him coughing but didn't take no notice and went on making the cake for tea. About five o'clock she went to call him—and there he was!" A frown knitted her brow and she touched the closed mouth of a tulip with an uncertain finger. She was wondering if the flowers were quite fresh.

"It's a wonder," said the fat woman, "that they didn't open him up."

"But the plates," said the district nurse, who had her black maternity bag on her knees. "He had the X-ray plates took not long ago and they didn't show anything."

The fat woman did not like to dispute with the district nurse, but, pushing the loaf more firmly into the basket, she said judiciously: "Oh aye, the plates! Funny though for him to go off so sudden: a young chap too. I wonder," she turned again to the woman with the wreath, "your sister didn't *ask* for him to be

opened up, like Joe Evans and Dai Richards in my street was, when they went. It's worth it for the compensation. The pits got to pay for silicosis, haven't they!" Indignation had begun to seep into her voice, before it subsided into doubt: "Of course there *is* a lot of bronchitis about."

Another woman, who was nursing a baby voluminously wrapped in a thick, stained shawl, said: "There's two men got it in our street. You can hear them coughing across the road. Jinny James's 'usband one of them, and *she* do say it's the silicosis."

"What d'you expect," said another, "with their lungs getting full of the coal-dust and rotting with it."

"They can always have plates taken," said the district nurse officially, and looking down her nose. She leaned across to the woman with the baby. "How's Henry shaping?" she asked, peering at the pink blob of face visible in the shawl's folds. She had brought Henry into the world.

"I just been taking him to the clinic," said the mother and whispered something in the ear of the nurse, who nodded sagaciously.

A woman, thin and cold as an icicle, climbed hastily into the bus. A crystal drop hung on the end of her nose. She wiped it away with the back of her hand and, having settled into her seat and nodded to the others, she exclaimed rancorously: "Not a bit of tidy meat in the butcher's! Only them offals, as they call 'em. And my man do like a bit of steak when he comes from the pit. I rushed down to Roberts's soon as I heard he 'ad steak. 'Steak,' he said to me, 'someone's been telling you fairy-tales——' " Something mournful in the air of the bus arrested her, and her roving eye then saw the wreath. Ears pricked, she asked sharply: "Who's dead?"

"'Usband of my sister Gwen Lewis," said the woman with the wreath.

"Gwen Lewis . . . let me see . . ."

"That stoutish piece," helped the woman with the baby, "up in Nodffa Street. 'Usband worked in Number One pit. He went sudden Sunday afternoon, lying on the front-room couch. Been coughing and had trouble with his lungs. A young fellow too."

"Not the silicosis," exclaimed the thin woman, "again!"

"Well——" said the woman with the wreath, "we don't know."

"He ought to have been opened up," repeated the fat woman.

"Gwen Lewis could get her compensation from the pits if they found the coal-dust had rotted his lungs."

"He had plates taken," said the district nurse, "months ago and there was no sign."

"He's in his coffin now," said the woman with the wreath. "The doctor said it was bronchitis. My sister don't want to go out or anything." Something of the finality of death seemed to oppress her too, hold her locked. "I had to buy this wreath for her. Fifteen shillings it cost." She examined a chrysanthemum; the petal-tips were slightly darkening. "I do hope it's fresh," she went on worriedly. "And I've got to come down again this afternoon; my black isn't ready."

Taking out a red and white spotted handkerchief, the young man with the girl covered his mouth and coughed hard. His girl had sat still as a rabbit; she seemed to look round at the others without looking round. Her ears were flushed.

"It's bronchitis weather," sighed the woman and pursed her mouth as Bryn Jones coughed again.

The baby suddenly let out a bawl, ferocious and astonishing from such a small leaf of a face.

"He wants his titty," nodded the thin woman, smiling bleakly.

"Oh, a hungry one he is," said the mother in a disconsolate way, as if she were complaining.

"What does he weigh now?" benignly asked the district nurse.

Two men jumped on the bus, followed by the conductor, who clipped the bell. The driver put away his pipe. Solid and red-faced among the whirling snowflakes, the policeman stepped back. The thin woman gazed out at him with a kind of disagreeable respect. "He don't look as if he's got to crave for steaks," she nodded, speaking to her neighbour as the bus moved safely off. "And I don't blame him, out in all weathers like they are."

The bus began its whining climb up the steep slope. The hard prune-coloured hills each side of the vale were beginning to hold the snow in their wrinkles. Sitting in the recessed back seat, one of the men who had jumped on last thing plucked the conductor's sleeve and said: "Hey, Emlyn, heard what happened in the cemetery on Saturday night—you know, when them incendiary bombs fell?"

"What?" said Emlyn vaguely, examining his row of tickets.

"Well, you know old Matt Hughes, the cemetery keeper?

Well, after them incendiaries fell he went all round the cemetery at midnight to see that everything was O.K. And who should be coming down one of the paths in the dark but two funny-looking chaps, and each of 'em carrying a tombstone under his arm. 'Hey,' said Matt, 'what you're doing walking out of 'ere?' The chaps was hurrying, but they stopped and said: 'Hell, it's getting too hot for us 'ere with them incendiaries falling.' 'Oh aye,' said Matt, 'they is a bit dangerous. But what you're doing carrying them tombstones under your arms?' 'Well,' said one of the chaps, 'there's the Home Guard at the gate, and we heard that people got to have Identity Cards now-a-days, haven't they?' "

The conductor gave a subdued guffaw and called: "Fares." Down the bus, where the man's tale had carried, there were smiles. The fat woman tittered. Bryn Jones's neck reddened and swelled with interior mirth, though his young lady did not seem amused. . . . Out in the rushing snowflakes a woman had hailed the bus, but it stopped much further up the road and she was obliged to pant through the windy flakes. "What," she shrilly scolded, climbing in, "is the matter with the damn buses? Why can't they stop when they're asst to?" Her snow-wetted eyes glared at Emlyn the conductor; she wore a man's cap skewered to a bun of hair by an ancient hatpin. Sitting down, her gaze pounced on the wreath and she asked, breathless: "Who's dead?"

"My sister Gwen Lewis's 'usband," said the woman with the wreath and gazed down heavily at the expensive cluster on her knees. The fat woman added for her:

"Last Sunday. The young fellow went into the front room after dinner and——" She gave the history. And the woman in the man's cap was sure it was the silicosis: a man in her street had gone off just the same and he wasn't thirty. She agreed he ought to have been opened up, even though the district nurse said the X-ray plates had been negative and the woman with the wreath said the doctor said it was bronchitis.

"It's *Proof*," added the woman in the cap, "if you open 'em up."

"*Of course*," assented the fat woman vigorously, and shoved the slipping tin of peaches further into her basket. "I wonder she didn't think of the compensation."

"I've got to go back this afternoon," lamented the woman with the wreath, but fluffing herself out a little, "to see about my black. What a potch it is, and snowing like this. My sister, she

can't do a thing but sits there by the fire all day, poor 'ooman."

"The New Inn!" shouted the conductor, roused to his duties by the scolding, though everybody knew every stone and post of the place.

The girl and her young man rose and passed down the silenced bus. He strutted a little, chest before him. She, rather skimped, went looking and not looking, her ears pink. As they stepped out of the door the married women nodded to each other knowingly, with a little grimace of the mouth and lowering ot the eyelids. The bus swung on.

Bryn spat as soon as he was out of the bus, then coughed again, in the bright, sharp air. Dilys opened her small fancy umbrella and held it against the snowing wind. She shivered. She was slight, unlike the dumpy older women in the bus. But there was a tenacity in her body and in the way she put her face into the wintry air. "Goodness me," she said with a worried kind of irritation, "I wish you'd do something about that cough."

"Hell, it's nothing," he barked. He wore no hat. His shoulders were broad, his limbs and hands thick and hard. The snowflakes turned into a grey liquor in the warm grease on his brisk black hair. The faint bluish pallor of his face was a little more evident. This week he was working on the night shift.

They went down a side turning. They lived in the same street. But before they reached it he put his hand in hers and stopped her against an old building where there was shelter from the whirling flakes and wind. It was a bakehouse, and the oven was inside the wall; they could feel the heat coming out. He would not be seeing her again until Sunday. "What's the matter?" he said.

"It's those women in the bus!" she exclaimed in a little burst of half-curbed hysteria.

"What's the matter with em?" he asked, mystified.

She frowned, trying to concentrate. She did not quite know. But she struggled to know. He tried to help. "Talking about opening that bloke up?" he suggested.

"No," she almost wailed. "It's . . . it's their *way*. Sitting there and . . . and talking, and——" No, she couldn't express it. But she went on: "And looking at me when we came out, looking at me like as if I'd soon be one of them . . . even," she added, the hysteria getting a hold, "carrying a wreath in my lap!"

He was a bit shocked. "Dilys," he said, "they're not bad; they're not bad women."

As suddenly the hysteria coiled down. But she spoke with bitterness: "No, that's the worst of it." She knew she had failed to express the fear knotted deep in her.

With a thick finger, grained with coal-dust, he brushed a stray snowflake off the tip of her nose.

"Ooh," she said. "It felt like a biff."

"Just a bundle of nerves you are!" he said in a loving, gratified way. Then he coughed.

"That cough!" she cried, the irritation returning. "Why don't you wear a hat and a muffler?"

"Oh, shut up," he growled, squirming in her irritation. "Didn't you hear it's bronchitis weather?"

After they parted in their street she felt—for she was not one to stay ill-tempered and sulky for long—that she was lucky really. He was in a reserved occupation, and he was a good miner, with a place of his own down under. They were going to be married in three months' time. He would be by her side for her to look after him.

A Dangerous Remedy

I

NO CHANCE VISITOR TO THREE SAINTS would believe it at first. But there, alive on her three-legged stool outside her cottage door, sat Jane Puw herself, ready to tell how she was snatched out of the jaws of death by an ordinary cow. Illness can be a complicated matter of deep consultations, expensive specialists and a long rigmarole treatment. The simple remedy advocated by Dr. Vavasor Evans, who had never travelled further than Bristol, achieved a miracle the same afternoon that it was prescribed and after the doctor from the market town had given Jane Puw up as lost to this world.

Dr. Evans no longer practised. He had retired to his native village of Three Saints, half lost among big hills and where outsiders seldom penetrate, after a long life in Bristol. There, as a

young man, he had known the distinguished Dr. Beddoes who first advocated a cow for the cure of certain complaints. It was true that Vavasor drank and that his housekeeper, up in the secluded house on the hillside, had often to put him to bed. But if a man can drink like a bulrush, live until he is eighty, and pull a going woman from the grave's brink, then the voice of criticism is stilled. After the cure Jane would hear no word of doubt about him; and she gave him an old cuckoo clock that he fancied instead of cash. Because of a long warfare she was carrying on with her daughter-in-law in the market town she was very pleased that he had kept her this side. She hoped to live to see the younger woman into the ground.

It was after a bout with this daughter-in-law that she had been stricken. She was already wheezing like a rusty gate, for her chest had never been strong. But she had taken her fowls and flannel to market just the same, and it was there she met her son's wife that, except to quarrel with, she had not spoken to for thirty years. They had a bout of tongues behind the flower stall, and that evening a palsy came over her. For three weeks she dwindled in loss of strength.

"Going I am," she whimpered to her husband Watcyn in one of her clear spells. "Under the cask in the shed my money is."

"You want to make things up with Mali before you go?" enquired Watcyn, who hated the feud that had gone on so long.

A red began to mottle the tough old cheeks. "That 'ooman's face you'd show in front of me while I'm lying helpless by here, Watcyn! And opening my cupboards to see if my linen is washed and prying into my pantry! For shame on you." She began to choke in fury already.

"There now, Jane fach, there now!" soothed Watcyn, for she had been a good wife, as matters are in this world. "No indeed, and she shan't come to your funeral either."

But Jane began to grizzle in self-pity that she was stricken in bed, devoid of power at last, while the younger woman could have many more years of spreading calumny. She went lower that day. The market town doctor, a brisk youngster, told Watcyn that nothing could be done. It was then that Watcyn, in despair, thought of old Vavasor, come to live up there on the mountain a year ago and a man born of the district who knew the ways of its sons and daughters.

He found Vavasor with a huge bandaged foot up on a chair, one sultry eye lurking down his face lower than the other, and a mildewed tuft of hair on his speckled pate—for since coming to Wales he had ceased to wear his wig. There was a glass of whisky in his hand. "What you want?" he shouted crossly, for he was of those physicians that are choleric of manner. "I am retired. The whole bloody world can be on its last gammy legs for all I care. Eight hundred quid I paid for this house and the winds blow round it fit to lift it off its backside."

But Watcyn knew that Vavasor, though odd as his unmatched eyes, had a gentle spot in his heart for the people of Three Saints. He begged him to take a peep at Jane. "A cart I got outside to take you down," he said. "And plenty of straw on the bottom for your bad old foot."

Cursing and pessimistic, Vavasor took his crutch and, wrapped in rugs and coats, descended to the village. By the time he arrived Jane was gone still lower and panted for air. She gave a little grunt when Vavasor blew into her ear but she did not open her eyes.

"Get a cow. Quick now." Watcyn gaping and putting his hand to his ear, Vavasor shouted: "Go on, quick. A full-sized cow in the pink, and bring her up here."

"Upstairs?" quavered Watcyn.

"Aye. That chest of drawers got to be moved. Bring a man or two with you. Go on, I'll wait; any whisky in the house?"

Three Saints is known for its good milk, as the village across the mountain is known for its soft wool. The cows are mild and contented; the grass is moist and lush. The herd at Cefn farm at the end of the village was first class, and as Watcyn had never had any dispute there he obtained the loan of an umber-and-white cow readily.

"More sense she's got than a lot," Llew the farmer said, selecting her, "and go upstairs she will easy. Just been milked she has too, so will be comfortable." In Wales, since doctors invariably fail to cure the stricken, great belief is placed in homely remedies and odd anointments. Llew's grannie herself always said that she was over ninety because in winters she wore a sow's ear under her bodice, changing it often.

So it was that a cow, gently thwacked by a Cefn cowman, was seen to enter Watcyn's cottage door. Watcyn and a neighbour

had moved all furniture out of the way. After a hesitation she mounted the short flight of stairs amiably enough and, wooed by the cowman, ambled into the low-roofed bedroom whisking her tail. Her obedient eyes were observant and curious.

Seated on a chair in a corner, his bad foot on a stool, Vavasor directed operations in that autocratic manner that had frightened the spectre from Bristol death-chambers many times in years gone by.

"Get her head over the bed, make her breathe right on the old woman's face. Get her to lick her tongue on the cheeks and mouth too. . . . No, you idiot," he shouted, brandishing his crutch angrily and his lower eye whirring in contempt, "don't *pull* her tongue out. Don't excite the animal. There's plenty of time. Breathing first!"

Already the soft fragrant cloud of the cow's breath was filling the low room, for, when curious, a cow breathes heavily and all its milky inside, composed of sweet grasses, clover and the ghosts of spring buttercups, is returned to the air, while a patina of juices stains the cool wet nose. The cow gazed in a long interested muse at Jane's face sunk in torpor on the pillow. At first it seemed she wanted to stir a horn playfully into that shut-eyed face. Lower and lower the cowman coaxed the nose. And the sweet cloud blew out of the shiny nostrils full on the twitched face.

"That's right," croaked Vavasor. "Now if she'll lick! Sprinkle a bit of salt on the old woman's face if she won't." As the cow hesitated to lick, Watcyn got salt and threw it with loving but excited fingers over Jane's cheeks and lips—for sure enough there were signs already that Jane was stirring out of her uneasy coma. And the cow's long grey-and-buff tongue came out and deliciously swept over Jane's face, even over eyes and brow. The soft *clop clop* of the rub was pleased and placid.

Anyone that has felt a cow's tongue on his skin well knows that the electric touch opens up antique sensations almost lost to the human's world. Jane's lids lifted suddenly and a pair of eyes swam up from the murky fumes of death's kingdom. At first, as her eyes looked into the cow's, there was only ordinary recognition in them; the exchanged gaze was much the same as when distant relatives see each other in market. Then full activity jolted into Jane's face. She snorted, she opened wide her mouth.

"Champion!" observed Vavasor in satisfaction, and shouted:

"Keep your mouth open far as it can, there's a good woman."

Benign and pleased with her feed of salt the cow breathed nothing but good-will into Jane's face. And there was no doubt that the beast was a doctor whose worth was beyond crowns and kingdoms. For, as full sense grew bright blue in her eyes, Jane gave vent to a vigorous shriek that showed she was already well back in the world. It was a shriek that a woman might give if a burglar is in her house or a mouse up her skirt.

And before the month was out she was downstairs making a pie.

II

Which was all very well. But there were a few doubters in Three Saints that said it was really the shock of seeing a cow in her bedroom that had brought Jane Puw back to life. These also said that such a shock might, on the other hand, mean the final push into the abyss if someone more sensitive than Jane were subjected to this treatment. Surely it was a dangerous remedy?

Nevertheless most people declared they were ready to try Vavasor's prescription when the occasion arose. A fact cannot be dodged, and there was Jane Puw back at her handloom, going to market with her sharp eyes on Thursdays and saying she never felt more ready to face anything. Plain there was magic healing in a cow's breath and tongue. Everybody waited to see if it would work the next time. But Three Saints is a healthy place and it was not until the next autumn that seventy-year-old Clydach Wyndham got taken to bed with a quick bronchitis.

Now, it was known that Dilys, his unmarried daughter who lived with him, was weary of the cantankerous old man. That first week of his illness she refused to have a cow brought into her little spick-and-span cottage. She had, prudently, been one of those who doubted the remedy, and also she declared now that no cow could ever get up the staircase, which was indeed very narrow. People criticised her hard, unbelieving heart and said why couldn't the old man be brought downstairs in blankets? There were mutterings against her. Finally an informer went over the mountain to tell Clydach's son who worked in a wool mill over there.

By this time Clydach was in a low state indeed. "No use trying

to put a stop to nature," his awful daughter declared, flat. "Gone to seed has my old datta, and time he dropped. Miserable he is to himself and me." She was one of those women who are without the humbugs that sweeten her sex. She would inherit the cottage.

But Ellis the son came tramping over the mountain, where the first snow lay blue in the morning, and, after a look at the father, he shook his fist in Dilys's face and abused her for not calling either him or a doctor.

"Quick," he shouted to the visitors coming in and out of the cottage—for it seemed now that Clydach wouldn't last the day, and death makes a house public—"fetch a cow."

"The stairs," cried Dilys, but a bit subdued in her brother's wrath—"very narrow they are, even for a coffin. I washed them this morning too. Some sacks I will get." Clydach was gone too far to be moved downstairs now.

She rushed about, covering the linoleum with sacking and brown paper. Shad, a neighbour, had run for a cow. One of the Cefn farm meadows lay up the lane outside the cottage, and in it browsed fifteen cows in speculative waiting. Without asking permission or consulting the farmer, he drove the first cow through the gate and hurried her down the lane. She was a black-and-white beast of full size and her udder was full; one of Llew's best milkers. Frightened, she began to whimper and swerve. He landed her an angry thwack. She shot forward, the big udder swinging.

"Darro, Shad," exclaimed Ellis, coming out of the cottage, "a littler one couldn't you bring? Never mind now, no time to waste. Hee now, shoo!" He gave the cow, hesitant outside the door, a push from the rear. Nervous, she skipped inside and at once her horn scratched the wall-paper, making Dilys screech.

Four men urged her towards the narrow stairs. "Just take the width she will," judged Ellis. "Shoved past the bulge she must be; covered pretty fair her ribs are. Hee now! Shoo!" The distracted beast looked at the stairs in hostility. Thwacks descended on her rump. The men got her forelegs on the first stairs. Sweating and forgetful of the sick man upstairs, they were shouting and cursing. Joined to the uproar were the lamentations of Dilys, who foresaw disaster to her tidy and clean cottage.

"A rope!" shouted Ellis. "Get a rope and drag the stupid old muffin up." The cow stood on the first stairs whimpering soft

moos and refusing to budge further. A rope was fetched, and the thinnest of the men climbed under the udder and up between the forelegs. The rope round the cow's neck, he stood on the landing and pulled. Behind, they thwacked and shouted. The cow heaved forward, her hoofs lifted by the men. But where the ancient wall bellied she became wedged.

It was then she lost her nerve altogether and began to bellow at the top of her voice. Her agonised exclamations shook the little cottage. In those cries were fear, protests and the anguish of her disturbed full udder. Below, the men's faces gazed up helpless, with Dilys purple in righteous anger behind them.

"Ah!" exclaimed Shad suddenly, "near her milking time it is; I forgot. Nancy do milk her and sing to her."

"Fetch Nancy, then," shouted Ellis.

"Blow my whistle," snapped Dilys, and fetched the second-hand policeman's whistle she had kept in the cottage since the time a tramp had broken in.

With the cow still bellowing, Shad blew the whistle on the doorstep. Several blasts he gave before, a distance away on the slope above the village, Nancy appeared on the farmhouse door-step. He beckoned to her like a madman; she came flying down. And from the village too everybody began hurrying up to the cottage.

"A bucket!" Ellis screamed above the cow's bellows. "A bucket get ready."

"Serve you right," snapped Dilys, but got a pail.

In bustled Nancy, very angry and shouting when she learned what had been done. "No business you had to help yourself," she shrieked. "Curdled her you have, no doubt. . . . Oh, my poor Betti, all right then; but here is your little Nancy, never mind." Her spectacles flashing, she snatched the pail, clattered it under the udder and, kneeling on the stairs, began to milk. But there was such rage in her fingers that the weeping cow made a sudden jump. And in clumsy heaves, the pail sent flying by her hoofs, she got up the last stairs. Shouts of triumph came from the crowd below.

On the landing she stood and let out terrific bleats of renewed agony. "Duw, duw, there's a row!" exclaimed Shad, shocked. In a temper and bawling insults at them, Nancy hurried upstairs. "A stool!" she shouted. "A stool bring me." Such a state she

was in, in sympathy for her loved cow, that for a while she couldn't compose herself to warble the song that best brought out the milk. Sitting on the stool, she began too high and out of tune. And still the cow noisily grieved. From the people downstairs rose a gabble of excitement.

Then someone exclaimed suddenly: "What about old Clydach? There's upsetting it must be for him, lying there by himself!"

"Reach his room we cannot," Dilys said, vindictive. "Blocking my clean landing that cow is."

But the son Ellis was squirming under the cow. He got to the front room. There he found his father gone. And it was clear that he had gone in a great fright. His fingers still clutched th edge of the bedspread as if to draw it over him in terror. Out on the landing the cow's bellows began to cease.

For, her voice adjusted at last, Nancy's low, neat contralto was singing an old air of the country while some of its richest milk splashed safe into the pail.